



ZEN THERE WAS MURDER

H. R. F. KEATING

B L O O M S B U R Y R E A D E R



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BLOOMSBURY READER

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Chapter 1

The two girls were going together from room to room, carrying piles of sheets and pillow cases, deftly making beds.

‘Schnell, schnell,’ said the blonde one.

‘We should be speaking in English,’ the dark one said.

Plump, serious.

‘It is so silly to pretend we are English when you cannot even express yourself clearly,’ the blonde said.

‘But that is the pact, and after all it is what we are here for,’ said the plump girl.

‘That is why we say we are here. Other people say we are here to make beds. Which is the truth?’

A malicious twinkle in the bright blue eyes.

‘But it is necessary to do some work to stay here so long,’ the dark girl said.

‘Though it would be a little better if the work gave us some chance of speaking English.’

The dark girl plonked a pillow down at the head of a bed and gave it two smart taps.

‘In any case there is not much to do this time,’ she said. ‘Seven people only.’

‘They will not be very young,’ the blonde girl said. ‘They will be the sort that pretend we are not here.’

‘You are always too pleasure minded.’

*

‘That’s all very well,’ said the heavily built young man with the thick black hair, ‘but it doesn’t tell us what we really

want to know.'

He uncrossed his legs and sat up straighter in the stackable green canvas chair. Then he adjusted the thick horn-rimmed spectacles on his prominent aquiline nose.

Ready for a scrutiny.

He glanced round at the others and at the large finely proportioned room and put his question.

'After all what we're here for is basically to find out one thing. Simply this: what is Zen?'

The man sitting opposite them, palms resting dormant on the flimsy trestle table, the Japanese, grinned.

The widespread lips showing the stubby teeth.

His head - shaved bare with two vigorous tufts of black hair at either side - was thrust forward. Beneath the bushy black eyebrows the large eyes alert but not restless. The broad shoulders relaxed under the loose folds of a black kimono.

'That is excellent,' he said. 'Go straight to the heart. That is the way. But it is not easy.'

Only a slight failure to sound the / in 'excellent' marred his English.

'Well then,' said the heavily built young man.

Putting on weight. The features fleshy and a little pallid.

His eye was suddenly caught by a loose thread on the cuff of his heavy tweed suit. He flicked it off.

'Well then, I've no doubt we're all here because we can see that Zen is pretty important. I, for one, haven't come unprepared. I've done a good deal of reading on the subject one way and another, and -'

'How many books?' said the Japanese.

'I - I'm sorry. I don't quite gather...'

The Japanese grinned again. He looked one by one at the half-dozen sheets of paper on the table in front of him, and the grin slowly faded.

‘There was a list of names,’ he said. ‘The warden gave it to me, but it has gone.’

He looked up at the man with the question.

‘You will have to tell me your name yourself,’ he said.

‘It’s Stuart, actually. Alasdair Stuart.’

‘Then I ask: how many books have you read about Zen, Mr Stuart?’

‘Well, actually, not any books, as such. I meant I’ve come across a good many – that is, several articles about it.’

‘That is good. Books about Zen are legs on a snake.’

The woman sitting next but one to Alasdair Stuart took the cigarette from her wide scarlet-slashed mouth and put a question abruptly.

‘Legs on a snake?’

‘A snake has no need for legs,’ said the Japanese.

‘That’s just the point,’ Alasdair Stuart said.

A reassertion.

‘We’ve all pretty well grasped that. No doubt that’s why we’re here. The thing to do is to ask the expert. To come to the fountain head. Mr – er – Utamaro, could you begin by telling us in your own words just exactly what Zen is?’

Mr Utamaro rose to his feet. In a single movement. He walked round the table towards Alasdair Stuart. Power and dignity in the unhurried stride.

‘This is Zen,’ he said.

His hand went to Alasdair Stuart’s prominent nose and tweaked it hard. The sudden smooth movement. An uncoiled spring.

Mr Utamaro stepped back and laughed. A long guttural peal.

Alasdair Stuart took out a white handkerchief and dabbed at his nose.

There was a rustle of quickly suppressed movement among the others. Chairs scraped back half an inch. Hands

lifted and dropped.

‘That’s very good,’ said the woman who had asked about the snake’s legs. ‘That’s the sort of thing I’m here for. It makes lovely copy, but couldn’t you tell us all the same what Zen is? I believe in asking the key question first.’

Mr Utamaro turned to her.

She took the cigarette from her mouth and held it vertically in front of her. The long fingers, the lean hand.

‘If you try playing games,’ she said, ‘I shall burn you.’

‘Very good,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Burning the hand that tweaks the nose: that is Zen.’

‘All right, you should know. But that isn’t going to satisfy the readers of *The World*.’

‘*The World*,’ said the girl on the extreme left. ‘I didn’t know you wrote for *The World*.’

The youngest of the group. Probably little more than twenty. Pertly pretty. Dressed in a sleeveless white blouse and a wide sweeping short skirt in bottle green. A little plump, with smooth dense white skin. And pale red hair, thick and long, caught into a pony-tail.

She had been sitting very still. As if the least move would attract attention to her. But at the mention of *The World* she leant forward and looked intently at the older woman.

Open-mouthed.

‘Honor Brentt,’ said the dapper man sitting between the journalist and Alasdair Stuart.

With a knowing air. His pencil-thin moustache, hair firmly slicked into place, dark flannel suit, white shirt, bright stripy tie.

‘Honor Brentt’s Thursday Page,’ said the girl with the pale red hair.

The open mouth closed in a momentary pout. She looked hurt and puzzled.

‘She also happens to be my wife,’ said the dapper man. ‘May I introduce myself? Manvers is the name. Gerry to my friends, and I won’t tell you what to my enemies.’

The girl sat back in her chair, watchful again.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said.

Gerry Manvers looked round.

‘That’s a bit more pally,’ he said. ‘Here we are stuck here for a week and nobody knows anybody. Let’s have some how-de-dos.’

He smiled, even white teeth flashing.

The members of the group looked at each other half-surreptitiously. An unwilling thaw.

‘Well, pet, I’ve told you my name,’ Gerry Manvers said to the girl. ‘How about telling the waiting world yours? I’ll bet it’s something pretty fancy.’

‘It’s Flaveen Mills, actually,’ the girl said.

‘Flaveen, what did I tell you. A smashing name. All right then, here we go. Flaveen, allow me to introduce Mr Alasdair Stuart, the well-known breeder of double-barrelled cocker spaniels.’

Flaveen giggled.

Alasdair Stuart crossed the semicircle of chairs and shook hands with her.

‘Delighted, Miss Mills,’ he said. ‘But please don’t run away with the idea that I’ve anything to do with dogs – beyond having a couple of the beggars at home – I’m a schoolmaster actually. Got a little prep school down on the south coast. Giving myself a bit of an intellectual treat for the last week of my holidays.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Flaveen.

Alasdair Stuart looked back at his chair.

He looked at Flaveen, who was looking at her chubby foot in its neat white sandal.

'Well,' he said, '- er, do call me Alasdair and all that, won't you?'

Flaveen looked up at him.

'Pleasure,' she said.

'Well, we'll be seeing more of each other then, er - Flaveen.'

'Yes,' Flaveen said.

Alasdair walked back to his place. The others watched him. The shoe on his right foot squeaked slightly.

Mr Utamaro chuckled.

'Who is going to speak now?' he said.

'If somebody's expected to speak, I'm quite happy to,' said Honor Brentt. 'After all, I specialize in having plenty to say for myself. What would you like to know? Shall I tell you about my husband? He's a fool, you know. It'll be obvious enough to everyone by the end of the day, if not sooner. So I may as well be the first to say it. He's not here out of any passionate interest in Zen.'

'Now, Honor, Honor. You know I'm just nuts about Zen. If only I could catch on to what the hell it is.'

'Listen, Gerry, darling.'

Honor leant towards him and put a lean brown arm on his shoulder.

'You're a pet and I love you very much. Just keep your silly mouth shut.'

'Okay,' said Gerry, 'tell the world about me. You always do. Give them the old, old story. "I Married A Pinhead" by Honor Brentt, the Woman They Can't Silence - or can't stop talking, it comes to the same thing.'

'Well,' Honor said, 'I don't believe in delicate reticences. People notice what goes on, it's no use pretending they don't. And if they know about a thing anyhow it makes it much easier if everyone can talk about it.'

The cigarette in the gesturing hand flicking up and down.

‘Look,’ she went on, ‘before a couple of days are out everybody here will know I dragged Gerry on this job because I couldn’t trust him at home. If I’m there, he knows I’m watching him. But if I go away, he’d just bring his office popsy straight home with him. He’s that sort. I’m telling you now so you won’t go gossiping about it behind my back.’

‘Everyone can just pretend I’m not here,’ said Gerry.

He winked at the clergyman sitting next to Flaveen. Unabashed. The clergyman – elderly, very tall, thin, a prominent Adam’s apple dodging in and out of his dog collar – slightly inclined his head. The long strands of white hair stirred.

‘It is part of the way,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It is some of the answer. But let me first tell you the names of the others. Then we shall all know each other.’

He dived at the papers on the table in front of him, looked at the first one he picked up and smiled.

‘It seems I have not after all lost what was entrusted to me,’ he said. ‘So we will be able to know each other after all.’

He sat back in his chair and laughed. His broad body shaking.

‘There is the Rev. Cyprian Applecheek,’ he said.

The clergyman smiled beneficently.

‘There is Miss Olive Rohan,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Miss Olive Rohan. Sitting next to Mr Applecheek. In her late middle age, with grey hair straight and cut short. A firm mouth – lipstick her sole concession to make-up – wide-set eyes, a broad brow. She wore a tweed costume, cut by a country tailor, worn but still good.

‘Good afternoon,’ she said.

Addressing one of the fine painted panels on the wall over Mr Utamaro’s shoulder. As having more in common with it than with the people beside her.

‘And there is Mr James Henderson,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I have told you his name: you know him.’

He chuckled again. The black kimono quivering.

‘Generally known as Jim,’ said the last of the group, the man of twenty-six, sitting between Miss Rohan and Gerry. The voice coming from between clenched teeth; the unyielding accent of the north of Ireland. He wore a sports jacket of Donegal tweed, brown flecked with glowing colours, and creaseless grey trousers. His complexion ruddy from long hours spent in the open. His wiry hair perfunctorily brushed. Dour.

‘Mr Utamaro’s right,’ Honor Brentt said. ‘They don’t tell you much, names. But anyhow you know a bit more about me than you might. And about this man I married.’

Again she put a hand out and touched Gerry. He appeared to take no notice.

‘He cheats me and I love it,’ she said. ‘He takes no notice of me. He prefers his beastly little Carrots at the office to me. Don’t you, Gerry? Go on, tell them. Tell them all.’

‘I love your lovely lolly,’ said Gerry.

Easily.

‘That’s why you married me, isn’t it?’ said Honor.

‘You have to put up with this sort of thing, folks,’ Gerry said. ‘It goes on all the time wherever we are. Brentt and Manvers, soul-strippers. I’ll tell you how it was really: I wasn’t even tempted to marry her for her money. I just married her and then found out it was the big fat salary cheque I was interested in after all. I don’t fall for temptation: it’s just that I never even see it. I’m down the plughole before I know what it’s all about.’

‘Now isn’t that extraordinarily interesting,’ said Mr Applecheek.

He beamed round happily. The adam’s apple dipping beneath the dog collar.

‘Extraordinarily interesting to us all – though of course one would have preferred not to hear it. Tell me, Mr Manvers, if I may ask a thoroughly personal question: do you never feel tempted by, as it were, temptation itself? You never feel the urge to put yourself in the way of having to struggle to avoid evil?’

‘I’ll be perfectly honest, padre,’ said Gerry. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Splendid,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Splendid, splendid. Wonderfully pagan. Though wrong, of course.’

‘Mr Utamaro,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘I would like to get back, if we may, to what we were discussing a few minutes ago. I confess I am still confused about the exact meaning of Zen.’

Disapproval. Back to normal.

‘I will tell you a story,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It is about a goose.’

He thrust forward his head and honked deeply two or three times.

Miss Rohan pursed her lips.

‘And the goose,’ Mr Utamaro went on, ‘has been put in a bottle while it is a fledgeling and now it is a big, fully grown bird. And it must be got out of the bottle, but the bottle must not be broken. You are to do it. At once. In what you call double-quick time.’

He pointed at Miss Rohan. She looked at the others.

‘Hurry, hurry,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Get the goose out. And do not harm it. Quickly, quickly.’

‘I suppose you are implying that my question can have no answer,’ Miss Rohan said.

‘No, no. The goose must be got out of the bottle. Miss Brentt, can you do it? Be quick, be quick.’

‘It’s a simple impossibility,’ Honor said. ‘And if you’re going to tell me it can be done in Tibet, I shall say I’d like to see it with my own eyes.’

Mr Utamaro laughed.

'You can't do it,' he said. 'But it is easy. Listen.'

The semicircle of intent watchers. The Japanese sitting at the table in front of them, hands held high, animated.

'Now,' he said. 'There, it's out.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' said Honor. 'It's nonsense. I don't think I could even use it in the paper.'

'Good, good,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It is nonsense. That is what we want.'

'Very clever,' Honor said. 'But it's just so much talk. Life isn't like that. It's -'

'Oh, but it is,' Flaveen said,

A bolt from the blue.

The vacant face suddenly lit up.

'That's just what it is like,' she said. 'It's the same as when is a door not a door, or when is someone in this house and not in it. He's perfectly right when you come to think of it.'

She looked round at them.

A puppy negotiates its first trick.

'Barmy, if you ask me,' said Gerry.

'But I would like to hear all the same what you think life is like, Miss Brentt,' said Mr Utamaro.

Honor did not answer.

'It is difficult, isn't it, Miss Brentt?'

'Difficult? What's difficult?'

'To say what life is like. But you were going to tell us.'

'Was I?' said Honor. 'I forget what I was going to say. I don't suppose it was very important.'

Interest lost.

'I know what's biting you,' said Gerry. 'That balloon.'

Honor turned to face him.

'Don't go on about that now, damn you,' she said. 'I was never worried about the ruddy balloon until you started.'

'No,' said Gerry, 'only rang me up from your office and talked of resigning. It nearly turned the blower blue.'

'This isn't the balloon those three girl dancers are going to go to the North Pole in, is it?' said Alasdair.

'That's the one,' said Gerry. 'All set to entertain the lonely scientists. And Honor's editor booked her in for the first lap. Thought it would be a cinch for her. Only what he didn't know was that she's so scared of heights she's convinced herself that she's only got to set foot in the thing for the whole shot to go for a Burton.'

'Shut up, Gerry,' said Honor.

She looked round the room. Daring comment.

No one spoke.

'Now look,' she said, 'I can tell my readers that when the experts are asked what Zen is they pull your nose. But that's not enough for Honor Brentt's Thursday Page. I made my name by getting at what really goes on. And that's what I mean to find out about Zen. What goes on. Well, Mr Utamaro, are you prepared to answer? What is Zen about - after all the tricky bits?'

Mr Utamaro got up.

'Come with me,' he said.

He strode to the door and out of the room.

Honor jerked to her feet and went after him. The others looked at each other and followed. Alasdair Stuart, the last to leave the room, looked round as he went, saw the black oil-stove in the elegant chimney place, stooped and extinguished it.

A duty done.

He went out, hurrying after the others. The empty echoing carpetless corridor. Ahead somewhere Mr Utamaro's firm steps breaking the silence. He followed.

The clear spring sunshine was lighting up the hall. Motes danced in the yellow beams. A breeze from a half-opened

window stirred the papers pinned to a big green baize notice board. As they fluttered the holes in the baize underneath were revealed.

Mulcheaten Manor
County Education Residential Courses
Adult Education Sub-committee
Week beginning 10 April
'Country and Scottish Dancing'
Week beginning 17 April
'Zen Buddhism'
Week beginning 24 April
'Accountancy for Trade Union Officials'
Week beginning 1 May
'Nature Study'
Week beginning 8 May
To be arranged
Week beginning 15 May
'Shakespeare - His Mind and Art'

Pinned at the bottom of this sheet a smaller one. *Major Francis, Warden, will be on annual leave from 17 April to 23 April. Mr Utamaro will be in charge.*

In a dark corner by the staircase the face of a grandfather clock just discernible. Its tick loud and crotchety, penetrating the sound of footsteps on the uncovered floor. Its hands were pointing to twenty-seven minutes past three and it chimed unharmoniously eight times.

The wide staircase. A dignified sweep. Shallow steps. Still uncarpeted. Mr Utamaro went up the middle of them without slackening pace. The others followed close to the graceful banister.

Pausing at the head of the stairs to regain breath, Mr Applecheek - a faint purple flush on his parchment cheeks - turned to Flaveen who was beside him and said:

'Ought we to know where we are going?'

Mr Applecheek pattered across to the shelves and peered at the largest oasis of books.

‘Theology,’ he said. ‘I thought they looked familiar. Woefully out of date, of course, woefully out of date. But then this year’s books will be out of date before long.’

He sighed.

They stood in silence. Flaveen shifted from one foot to the other. Mr Utamaro appeared lost in deep thought.

Suddenly his whole face was filled with a look of consternation. Every feature totally engaged. The eyes wide, the jutting eye-brows lifted, the nostrils extended, the mouth open. A caricature.

‘The oil-stove in the common room,’ he said. ‘Major Francis was most insistent that it should be put out if there was no one there. And I have forgotten all about it.’

‘That’s all right,’ Alasdair said. ‘I happened to spot it and put it out myself. Major Francis is quite right, you know. Those things don’t want to be left unattended when you can’t be certain they won’t be knocked down.’

The schoolmaster’s reproof.

Mr Utamaro looked relieved.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you would like to see a toy.’

Confident once more. A statement. Not to be argued with.

Without waiting for their reactions he strode out of the room.

Proprietorially.

‘We are to study something called koans,’ she added, ‘and we may achieve something else – the word escapes me.’

‘Satori,’ said Alasdair. ‘You have to work for it pretty hard. It means enlightenment.’

‘And what does koan mean?’ said Honor.

‘A koan, as I understand it...’

Alasdair broke off. Mr Utamaro was pointing to his nose.

‘Oh,’ said Alasdair, ‘yes. I suppose so. It’s a way of making you think about – about things. It may be something done. Er – like a tweak on the nose, or something like that. Or it may be a sort of saying, a mysterious saying.’

‘A riddle,’ said Flaveen, ‘I told you so all along.’

‘Zen monks,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘sit on the ground. But I do not think you could sit like that for long.’

He looked at them and chuckled.

‘We will find some chairs,’ he said, ‘and then there will be no need for chin-rests, and that was going to be difficult. I wrote to Harridges for them, but they told me that in England you do not have them.’

‘Chin-rests?’ said Flaveen. ‘Whatever are chin-rests?’

‘When you do not know,’ Mr Utamaro said, ‘ask. That is Zen. A chin-rest is a stick which a monk puts under his chin so that he will not fall over in long hours of meditation.’

‘Sure, it’ll be long hours of sleeping, I’m thinking,’ said Jim Henderson. ‘Idle time spent at the expense of the community.’

Ulster sociology.

‘There you are wrong in two things,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘One: during the meditation periods two attendants walk up and down the lines of monks and if they see one not working at his koan they hit his back with a stick. Two: Hyakujo said a thousand years ago “A day of no work is a day of no eating”.’

‘There’s theory and practice,’ said Jim.

In a single grunt.

They walked forward into the empty room. Over the double doors was a small gallery entered from the floor above. On it were stored various articles – a standard lamp with a broken shade, the bust of a man of severely classical appearance and a large wooden crate.

'I expect it's another riddle,' Flaveen said. 'Fancy it all being a sort of joke, and I was afraid it would be something much too highbrow for me.'

'It was very brave of you to come, then,' Mr Applecheek said. 'Very brave indeed. Even rash.'

'Oh well, I had to come.'

A fact stated.

'Yes, so did I. I had to come.'

They said no more and set off after the others. Two self-absorbed faces: the old one, crackly skinned, lined, worked upon; the young one, a white peach, untouched, vulnerable.

Another corridor. Doors on each side. Their paintwork not fresh. Ingrained grime round the handles.

Mr Utamaro stopped at a pair of double doors, no more imposing than the others. He paused with both hands on the twin doorknobs.

'The Zen-Do,' he said.

He opened the doors. The others crowded together behind him.

The room was large with big windows looking down on to a wide lawn dominated by a huge cedar of Lebanon. Its dark green leaves filtered the light at each window and chilled the air of the room. There was no furniture, only on shelves which took up most of the walls were here and there a few scattered books, leaning together in protective clumps.

'When is a surprise not a surprise?' said Flaveen.

She giggled.

'This is the Zen-Do?' said Miss Rohan. 'Was that the word?'

Severity.

'The Zen-Do, the meditation hall,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Perhaps this is the answer to your question, Miss Brentt. Sitting here like monks in a monastery in Japan and studying

the koans I give you, perhaps - who knows? - you will achieve satori.'

Honor looked round and said abruptly:

'The old library. Must have had room for a good many books. The walls go up two storeys, I suppose. What did you call it?'

'Mr Utamaro said it was the Zen-Do, the meditation hall,' Miss Rohan said.

Chapter 2

The others looked at each other.

‘I think we had better follow again,’ said Alasdair. ‘Stick together, you know.’

He slipped the heavy horn-rimmed spectacles into his top pocket and set off in pursuit.

The clean swept corridor. One, two, three doors. Mr Utamaro had opened the fourth and they just saw him going into the room. They filed in behind him.

The small room was completely empty except for a glass showcase standing on metal legs in the middle of the bare floor. The case itself was eighteen inches long and twelve wide. Its base was of black velvet and on this there rested a single object.

They crowded round on either side of Mr Utamaro to look at it. The dusty, neglected room – a large patch of the faded wallpaper had been pulled off one of the walls – and the shiny intrusive showcase focused attention compellingly on the object they enshrined.

A short sword or long dagger, its fine steel blade curving slightly and running into the hilt without a guard. The hilt itself was worked with delicate ornamentation in the Japanese style. The contrast between the grace of this work and the devoted purposefulness of the plain close-grained steel of the blade.

‘This must be the famous sword,’ said Honor. ‘I wondered if that was what we were going to see. We had a couple of pairs about it when there was that business at the customs when you arrived. That was what put me on to you.’

‘What was that?’ said Miss Rohan. ‘I saw nothing about it in my paper.’

‘Not the sort of story that gets into your sort of paper,’ Honor said. ‘Too much human interest. To begin with the sword’s worth a packet, and, more to the point, it was used for a murder.’

‘A murder, oh dear,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘Was that why it was mentioned in the papers?’

‘No, the murder was years ago,’ Honor said. ‘This time it was because the customs had some query about it, that was all. A local reporter got on to it and sent in a bit with the romantic history angle. It was a quiet night, no heiresses eloping, no sex killings, so it made a little story. “Customs Quiz Murder Weapon.” You know the sort of thing.’

‘I don’t think I do,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘No, perhaps you don’t. It’s just what brings me my bread and butter,’ said Honor.

‘And me my jam,’ Gerry said.

‘The trouble with believing that things such as the sword are important,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘is that you do not listen to what is said about them.’

The introspective comment.

‘Who believes they’re important?’ said Honor.

‘The reporter you spoke of did,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘That was why he sent you information which I had not given him. This sword has never been used to commit murder.’

‘You mean the papers got the facts wrong?’ Alasdair said.

‘Only when you have gone past facts,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘can you observe them with enough detachment to see them correctly. If your reporter had been instructed in Zen he would have heard me tell him that the sword I had with me – the sword in the showcase here – was one of a pair. In the fourteenth century swords for samurai were made in pairs, a big one and a small. This one is the smaller of a pair, the wakizashi.’

‘How is that spelt?’ Alasdair said. ‘I’ve no doubt Miss Brentt will want to send her paper a corrected version of the story.’

Honor waved the suggestion away with an awkward scrubbing motion of her long skinny hand.

‘How interested do you think our readers will be in that?’ she said. ‘They’d resent the waste of space, and we’re not in business to make our readers resentful.’

Alasdair took the horn-rimmed glasses from his pocket and put them on his heavy nose. An improvement in severity.

‘Well, I’m relieved to hear that this sword has killed no one,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘It looks decidedly capable of doing so.’

‘Aha,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘someone else who is too caught up in trying to remake the world to their own pattern. You did not hear what I said, Miss Rohan. My actual words were: “This sword has never been used to commit a murder.” But it has, indeed, killed many people in battle as it was handed down from samurai to samurai over six hundred years. And some of them will have used it to take their own lives too – the wakizashi is the blade used for hara-kiri.’

‘It gives me the creeps, it does really,’ said Flaveen.

In a whisper.

Jim Henderson, standing near her, said:

‘Why would you let yourself think a thing like that? That sword’s not a particularly effective weapon in a modern context. I’d take a simple sten gun any day.’

‘Nevertheless I’ve no doubt the sword’s lethal,’ Alasdair said.

He leant forward and inspected the showcase.

‘I suppose this is perfectly safe?’ he said.

‘It was installed by a famous firm of locksmiths,’ Mr Utamaro answered. ‘Major Francis insisted on it. He has

great confidence in the firm.'

Alasdair straightened up.

'Oh, yes,' he said, 'I see the nameplate. They're good people. The best.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Miss Rohan said. 'One would not want a thing like that loose about the house.'

'Oh, this one's safe enough,' said Gerry. 'It's the other one, its big brother, that you want to watch out for. The one the murder was committed with.'

He turned to Mr Utamaro.

'I'd lock that up too if I were you, really I would, old boy.'

'You mean the other sword of the pair is somewhere in the house, not under lock and key?' said Miss Rohan.

'It is in America,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It was stolen from the family who owned the pair about fifty years ago.'

'And it was traced to America but never found?' asked Alasdair.

'Yes, it was found,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It was found in the body of the thief who stole it, put there by an accomplice. After that the owners didn't want it. It is in a police museum now, I believe.'

'I should like to see it,' said Mr Applecheek. 'I should like to see the pair together.'

He bent over the case and pored over the slim weapon on its wide black velvet bed.

'Wonderful.'

'I don't understand,' said Miss Rohan. 'I thought Mr Manvers told us the other one of the pair was also in the house, and now I learn it is in America.'

'Quite right,' said Gerry. 'I did tell you it was in the house. I told you a beastly lie. Give you the old ants in the pants, you know.'

'Oh, I see,' said Miss Rohan. 'A joke.'

Douche.

'Be careful, Mr Applecheek,' said Mr Utamaro.

His hand flashed out and moved the old clergyman back a few inches from the showcase.

'The case must not be touched,' he said.

'Not touched?' said Honor. 'What nonsense is that?'

'It is not nonsense,' Mr Utamaro said.

The quick smile baring the stumpy teeth.

'I assure you there is a very good reason for it.'

'A bit of hocus-pocus,' said Honor.

'No,' said Mr Utamaro, 'not hocus-pocus at all.'

'Right,' said Honor.

She stepped quickly up to the showcase beside Mr Applecheek and placed her hand swiftly and decisively on top of it.

The room suddenly filled with deafening noise. A long high-pitched throbbing note. Occupying every cubic inch between the four walls with equal unbearable intensity.

The group round the showcase looked at each other bemusedly. Slowly lifting their heads; underwater in an overwhelming current.

Mr Utamaro smiled. He spoke but only the movement of his lips made this plain even to those standing near him.

Then he squatted on the floor under the showcase and turned something. A small trapdoor in the bottom of the case dropped. Mr Utamaro put a hand into the recess and, as suddenly as the blare had begun, it stopped.

Nobody said anything.

The silence was as different from the stridency of the moment before as one world from another.

Mr Utamaro turned the mechanism under the showcase again.

'That was the alarm bell,' he said. 'It is set to go off at the lightest jar to the case.'

‘And it is switched off from underneath the case?’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Most ingenious.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The door underneath is opened by a combination lock for which only the warden and I know the code. It is possible with care to open it without setting the alarm off if you know the numbers, but if you get them wrong the alarm is actuated in that way too.’

He swung the trap door shut and rose to his feet in a single lithe movement.

‘Now it is set again,’ he said. ‘Don’t touch the case.’

‘All right,’ said Honor, ‘I’ve learnt my lesson. But why did you have all this installed?’

‘That was because of the papers,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Major Francis was worried because they had described the sword as being so valuable, and he insisted on precautions being taken. He took charge of the whole matter himself, and personally supervised the installation.’

‘But surely the sword is of considerable value,’ Mr Applecheek said.

‘Yes, it is valuable. After all it was made by the great smith, Muramasa. But it is not quite as valuable as the papers said.’

‘Okay,’ said Honor, ‘I’ll tell my editor his whole staff has got to have training in Zen. I know the routine: “unless you are uninterested in facts you cannot be interested in them.” It’s a line, all right.’

*

As they wheeled the tea trolley away from the Common Room – as Major Francis, the warden, was always careful to call it – the two German girls were giggling.

‘So English,’ said the chubby one.

‘One day I will write a little thesis – *fünfzigtausend* words on the English tea ceremony,’ said the other.

Flaxen plaits hanging demurely.

Abruptly the giggles ceased.

Mr Utamaro came striding towards them.

‘Good evening,’ he said as he passed.

‘Good evening, Herr Professor.’

As Mr Utamaro entered the Common Room Miss Rohan was saying:

‘I’m so glad they manage to get some help here. Things are not what they were. Or how they should be.’

She was sitting with Honor, Jim Henderson and Alasdair. Mr Utamaro bowed and went to sit at his table a little apart from them. He put down a small bundle of papers and began sorting through them. A small frown of perplexity.

‘Domestics are certainly a terrible problem,’ Alasdair said. ‘My housekeeper at the school is nearly driven mad by it.’

‘Then you are not married, Mr Stuart?’ Miss Rohan said.

‘No such luck,’ said Alasdair.

Miss Rohan sighed.

There was a short silence.

Jim Henderson looked round at the others, grimly. And went back to his book *An Approach Towards Sociology for Some Polynesian Islands*, Minnesota University Press, 75s.

‘I came down for this course largely because of my niece,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘She is an art student, you know. At the Slade. I’m sure you’d like her – only, of course, you’re unlikely to meet her – she’s such a nice girl. It’s just that the other students are often, I think, a little wild. It’s the scholarship system. They don’t know who they’re getting.’

A pause.

‘You say you came here because of her?’ said Alasdair.

‘Yes, yes. When she came to stay after Christmas – and she seems to come so seldom these days – she talked a lot about Zen. She said it was the key to what is called, I believe, action painting. I try to follow her interests, but I tell her that some of this modern painting goes too far. Too far.’

‘Oh, I think one should be pretty tolerant,’ said Alasdair. ‘I try to keep up with things. I may be a schoolmaster, I say. But I’m not an old fogey.’

Jim Henderson scowled behind the pages of his book.

‘I must admit,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘I had expected it to be a lot more abstruse. I think you make it wonderfully clear, Mr Utamaro.’

Mr Utamaro looked up at the sound of his name.

‘I am sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t hear you. I seem to have mislaid a piece of paper Major Francis gave me, a return for the county authority. It has to be filled in. What was it you said?’

‘I was remarking how clear you make Zen,’ Miss Rohan said.

‘How is it,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘that a man of great bodily strength cannot lift up his legs?’

Miss Rohan smiled.

‘It’s the poetry I like,’ she said. ‘It’s all so unexpectedly normal.’

Gerry stood in the doorway.

‘Unexpectedly normal,’ he said. ‘Come and see what I’ve found.’

Chapter 3

Mr Utamaro jumped easily to his feet.

‘Normality,’ he said, ‘is what we want to happen. If everything was always normal the world would freeze to death. Where do we go?’

‘This way, if you please,’ said Gerry.

They followed him into the hall – *Major Francis, Warden, will be on annual leave ...*, the irritated tick of the grandfather clock – and out through the wide front door, across the rutted gravel of the drive, round the corner of the house to the big lawn dominated by the gnarled and sprawling cedar of Lebanon.

The springy turf of the lawn, matted and dense with two hundred years’ growing. The towering tree, its leaves black against the fading blue of the sky. The flower beds raggedly stocked with little cared for perennials. A line of irises against the house wall just coming out, their purple flowers glowing in the evening light.

On a stone bench at the far edge of the lawn where a pergola cut off the rest of the garden Flaveen was sitting. Languid in the evening air.

Honor stopped and looked at her. The others followed Gerry. Tongue in his cheek.

‘Isn’t it a bit chilly out here?’ Honor said.

‘It’s all right,’ said Flaveen.

She made no move.

Honor turned and went after the others.

‘Look,’ said Gerry.

From nearly under the immense tree he pointed suddenly upwards into its wide horizontal lower branches.

With their eyes shaded against the still light-filled sky, they peered up.

Standing abstractedly some fifteen feet above the ground, lost to the world, the Rev. Cyprian Applecheek. The evening breeze moved his long straggly white hair, otherwise he stood motionless. A dreamy contented smile was on his lips.

‘He’s been like that for ten minutes at least,’ Gerry said. ‘I hoped he’d stick while I went to fetch an audience. Otherwise I’d have never been believed. It’s always a bit dicey for a born liar when he gets stuck with something true.’

‘Surely he’s in rather a dangerous position,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Safe as a house,’ said Gerry. ‘Take my word for it. I’m a member of the Tree Climbers Club, as a matter of fact, so I know what’s what.’

‘Indeed,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘the Tree Climbers Club, I didn’t know there was such a thing.’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’ Gerry said.

‘Oh, good gracious, no,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘It was simply that I merely...’

‘Well, take it from me. There is a Tree Climbers Club. Of course, we don’t like it to be spread about too much. We’re a pretty retiring mob. But there isn’t a tree in Great Britain worth climbing that one of the boys hasn’t been up at one time or another.’

‘That’s most interesting. I had no idea,’ said Miss Rohan.

A murmur.

‘Mr Applecheek.’

Mr Utamaro’s voice – the just noticeable weakness over the / in ‘Applecheek’ – loudly and clearly in the evening

quiet.

Silence. The reverberations of the call dying away.

Mr Applecheek moved. Looked round him. Looked down.

‘Good evening, my dear fellow. A splendid evening. The English spring, the English spring.’

‘Mr Applecheek,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘have you been up there long?’

‘Up here?’

The old clergyman looked round again.

‘Ah, this tree. No, no. Not long. I just stepped up a few minutes ago.’

Ganglingly he began to come down. The branches an irregular flight of steps. He stooped to get under the one he had been standing on, halted with his feet level with their heads to dust a loose leaf from his arm, came on down.

Alasdair held out a hand to him. He took it and jumped the last two feet, shamblingly.

‘Thank you, my dear fellow.’

He began to walk away. A gesture. Half salute, half benediction.

‘Oy, oy,’ said Gerry.

Mr Applecheek turned. A glance of mild inquiry.

‘Excuse me poking my nose in,’ said Gerry, ‘but what the hell were you doing up there?’

Mr Applecheek looked at him. He raised his eyebrows a little.

‘My dear Manvers, are you not a Christian? Surely one cannot go for long in this world to-day without at least a thought for St Simon Stylites?’

Slow steps across the springy turf of the lawn. Purposeless, unhurrying, progressing. Mr Applecheek’s rounded shoulders disappeared behind the corner of the house.

Stacking plates in the big neglected kitchen the two German girls. The dark one with a rosy blush on her plump cheeks.

‘But I do not like it,’ she said. ‘I tell you on my hip he smacked me.’

‘Colloquially it is “bottom” not “hip”,’ said the blonde one.

The blue eyes beneath the flaxen plaits bright with excitement.

‘I do not care. It is what he did.’

‘Ah, Mr Gerry. He will make it a week of events.’

*

In the dining room – the trestle tables, the neat hard chairs, the solidity of the dark panelling on the walls – Gerry tipped a boxful of paper hats and carnival novelties on to the table the group were sitting at.

‘Got them in the village shop when I went along to rustle up some drink,’ he said. ‘You may be surprised to hear we’re going to have a party. ‘Alf a mo’.’

He jumped up, opened the door to the kitchens and dragged through it a large crate of bottles.

‘You all thought it was going to be a week of studious studification,’ he said. ‘But you reckoned without little Gerry. It’d take more than Zen Buddhism to damp him down.’

‘Look here, old man,’ Alasdair said, ‘isn’t this going a bit far? I don’t object to a decent drink, but paper hats for an occasion like this seem to me to be rather much. You may not have come here with any serious intentions, but the rest of us have.’

He sat back and put his glasses on. The heavy tortoiseshell against the thickening flesh of his nose.

‘Tell me,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘is it an English custom to put on a paper hat on an occasion of rejoicing?’

A mild inquiry.

‘I’ll say it is,’ said Gerry, ‘and believe you me, this is going to be an occasion of rejoicing or they’ve left the hops out of

the beer.'

'Then give me a hat,' Mr Utamaro said.

'Well,' said Gerry, 'you certainly find it easy to drop the old Zen at the sniff of a party. That's my boy.'

'For one who has cultivated Zen,' said Mr Utamaro, 'there is always a party.'

He began smoothing out the little pink paper bundle Gerry had given him.

'Mr Utamaro,' said Miss Rohan, 'I don't think you ought to be allowed to believe that this sort of thing is customary at all levels of English society.'

'Miss Rohan,' said Gerry, 'permit me to offer you a snifter.'

'I don't think so, thank you,' Miss Rohan said.

The smile of duty.

Gerry filled every other glass in sight without asking for permission. A barman's deftness.

'Hey, come on,' said Flaveen, leaning over towards Alasdair, 'you're not wearing your hat. You've got to wear a hat. Everyone has a hat when it's a party.'

'That's my girl,' said Gerry. 'We'll have a party for two if no one else'll play ball.'

'Listen to me,' said Honor. 'There's no party. I dragged you here because I couldn't trust you at home. And I don't care who knows that. But you needn't think you're going to wreck the whole thing out of spite. If this is to be a week of serious study it's going to be a week of serious study. And you'll keep out, unless you can behave.'

'You go up to bed with a good book,' Gerry said. 'There's a smasher in my case if you want it. Brought it along as my contribution to the good cause. Very appropriate. Gerry knows what's what. Little opus called *Hindu Erotic Sculptures*. Very tasty.'

'I'm staying down and you're behaving,' Honor said.

'You getting worried or something?' said Gerry. 'You brought me here to be out of harm's way, you know.'

Honor looked at him.

'I told you before,' she said. 'I don't know whether I'm worried or not.'

Gerry picked up a false nose from the pile of novelties on the table and slipped it on. The grotesque cardboard proboscis, the neat rim of moustache under it.

'Hey,' said Flaveen again, 'you still haven't got that hat on, Alasdair.'

Alasdair sitting staring at the plain boards of the table in front of him.

'I should have thought a week was all too short a time to get to understand Zen without a lot of fooling around,' he said.

'Go on,' said Flaveen, 'we can't have lectures and that all the time. Stick the hat on and liven up a bit. Be a sport.'

'My dear girl, I should hope I am a sport.'

Alasdair stuck the hat on his head at a defiant angle.

'I turned out for my college once a week in term,' he said. 'I wasn't particularly good at games, but I played them for the sake of playing. I always say the only success I had in the sporting field was a half-blue for chess.'

He laughed.

Flaveen leant across the table – a few remaining dishes, the glasses, a little beer already spilt – and smiled warmly at Alasdair.

'College,' she said. 'How lovely. Were you Oxford or Cambridge?'

'Oxford, actually.'

'Oh goody, I love dark blue.'

Alasdair took a swig from his glass.

'Come on,' said Gerry. 'We've got to make the party go.'

He picked up a blow-out tweeter from the table, put it to his lips and hooted through it. The rolled paper shot out to its full length. On the tip a bright green scrap of feather.

‘Charming,’ said Mr Applecheek.

Sitting quietly a little back from the table, sipping his glass of beer.

‘Charming, though vulgar.’

‘What are these things?’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I have never seen them before.’

He peered down at the pile with passionate curiosity. A scientist.

‘I call ‘em tweeters,’ said Gerry. ‘Fine old British custom.’

He blew another long note. A dying fall.

‘Here you are,’ he said, ‘take one. Have a go. See if you can hit Jimmy boy down there. He hasn’t said a word for hours. Wants livening up.’

‘I don’t think I’ve any contribution to make to this,’ Jim said. ‘It’s not what I came here for.’

Between clenched teeth.

Flaveen scrabbled at the pile of tweeters.

‘I’ve got to have a dark blue one,’ she said. ‘I’m going to tweet for Oxford.’

‘Here,’ said Gerry. ‘Here’s a nice green one. I’d taken it for my very own, but you can have it. Suit your hair.’

‘No, I want a dark blue.’

‘Well, you can’t have one. There isn’t one.’

‘Yes, there is. There. You were trying to hide it.’

Gerry handed her the dark blue tweeter with an exaggerated bow. Flaveen snatched it from him. Gerry picked up his own green one and blew it fiercely at Alasdair. The unrolled paper tapped him on the cheek.

Alasdair sat unmoved. He had hunched up again, staring darkly at the empty plate in front of him.

‘Happy Christmas,’ said Gerry.

Alasdair looked up.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘good show.’

An inner world.

‘You’re certainly making the party go,’ said Gerry. ‘But I’ve got just the thing for you. Half a tick.’

He left his place and went into the kitchens. A quick scream could be heard from behind the closed door.

Mr Utamaro blew a long tweet.

‘I feel I must explain,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘Mr Manvers is misleading you, Mr Utamaro. These things are rather vulgar.’

Mr Utamaro put down his tweeter.

‘Two monks were quarrelling over a cat,’ he said. ‘The master seized it and held a sword over it. Then he said “If either of you can say something to save it I will let it go.” Neither monk could say what was necessary and the master killed the cat. Next day Joshu came and the master asked him what he would have said. Joshu took off his sandals, and put them on his head. “You would have saved the cat,” the master said.’

They had all one by one paid attention to the story. They sat in silence now.

Disconcerted.

‘A little lesson about the futility of quarrelling, I think,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘But tell me, would the master have used a special sword, a wakizashi, like we have upstairs, for instance?’

‘Any sword,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Indeed, indeed. Well, I won’t spoil the fun by sitting among you too long. The clergy should always leave an event of this sort after grace, I believe. Though, of course, I wasn’t asked to say grace.’

He got up, blinked at them, and went.

Gerry came out of the kitchen, his hands thrust in his pockets. Swaggering. He was wearing a large red artificial flower in his button-hole.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Padre gone off? No harm, he wasn’t exactly helping the party. I dare say he wants a little climb in his tree. Potty as they come.’

‘I think he’s rather sweet,’ said Flaveen. ‘He’s been awfully nice to me.’

‘I think you’re pretty sweet yourself,’ Gerry said.

He minced round the table to Alasdair who was still looking sombrely at his plate. The smeary remains of trifle.

‘I think you’re sweet too,’ he said.

He crouched down beside Alasdair who turned bleakly to look at him.

‘Would you like to smell my pretty flower?’ Gerry said.

The parody of coyness.

‘I’m sorry, old chap,’ Alasdair said, ‘I – I was thinking. What did you say?’

‘Does itsums bitsums want to smell the pretty flower?’ Gerry said.

‘Flower?’

Alasdair peered at it.

A fine stream of water shot from its centre and sprayed all over his face.

Gerry fell back on the floor shaking with laughter.

‘Yet another time-honoured British tradition,’ he said.

He pulled the flower from his buttonhole exposing a thin rubber tube that ran down to a rubber bulb in his pocket.

‘Quite simple,’ he said, ‘You fill this bulb with a quantity of some harmless liquid – or even water – and at the requisite moment you give a sharp squeeze producing a fine jet in the required direction. Price two and six.’

‘When I go back to Japan I will take one,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘And when a monk asks, “Why did the Bodhidharma come

from the west?" Squirt. The Zen answer.'

Alasdair, wiping the water from his face, looked at him gloomily.

'There does seem to be an element of horseplay in Zen,' said Miss Rohan.

She sighed.

'That's what I don't understand. Some of it is so poetic. But then you tell us that a thing like Mr Manvers's squirt would be useful to you.'

'The poet Yuan-Wu teaches us this,' said Mr Utamaro. "'If you are a real man you may certainly drive away the farmer's ox.'"

'A poor man may drive away the rich man's ox. Now you're talking,' said Jim Henderson.

He looked along the table at Mr Utamaro.

'This interests me,' he said. 'The possibility of Zen being interpreted in terms of direct action. What did you say the name of that poet was?'

'The poet Yuan-Wu,' said Mr Utamaro.

His hand stole out towards his tweeter.

Jim squared his elbows on the table.

'Let's get this straight,' he said. 'Is it right at all that Zen has a politico-sociological content which allows the needy to appropriate goods according to their need?'

'With Zen conventions do not exist,' said Mr Utamaro.

A concession.

He had picked up the tweeter and was rolling it lovingly in his fingers.

'Now, why hasn't this aspect of Zen been utilized in the economic field?' said Jim.

'For heaven's sake, Jim boy,' said Gerry. 'This is meant to be a party.'

'What this particular party wants is a bit of sociological content,' said Jim.

The tight Ulster vowels.

'Whoops, whoops. Socio— what's that?'

'I think he's quite right.'

Flaveen. An unexpected voice.

She jumped up and picked up her chair.

'I'm going to come and sit next to you,' she said to Jim. 'I don't know what you mean by half of what you say, but you're keen about it and that's for me.'

She put her chair down beside Jim's.

'It looks as though your party's dying a natural death, darling,' said Honor.

'Listen,' said Gerry.

A glint of anger.

The door opened and Mr Applecheek came in.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you,' he said.

Walking towards them. The narrow aisle between the rows of tables.

'To tell you the truth I do not find myself in the mood for contemplation. A trace of excitement. Wholly unaccountable, wholly unaccountable, of course.'

He smiled to himself.

'But I feel I must really join in the revels. Harmless fun, harmless fun. At least to begin with.'

'Come on in, padre,' said Gerry. 'Come on in. The party will take on a new lease of life. Which was your glass? Let me fill it up.'

'Well, I will, thank you,' Mr Applecheek said. 'I owe myself a drink to be perfectly frank. Perfectly frank.'

Gerry poured some beer into his glass.

'Not his first if you ask me,' he said quietly.

Mr Applecheek approached the table.

'No, not my first,' he said, 'but only my second. A dreadful disability in a clergyman, a good sense of hearing, but we must carry our burdens as best we may.'

'A gentleman never counts anyway,' said Gerry.

Unabashed. Unabashable.

'Here's how.'

The glasses met, clinked.

'Fill 'em up,' said Gerry. 'Jimmy, yours is empty. Pass it over.'

'I can't afford to go drinking all night,' said Jim.

'Never mind,' Gerry said. 'They're on the house.'

'Yes,' said Honor, 'my house.'

'What's thine is mine,' Gerry said. 'Lovely.'

'And what's mine is mine,' said Honor.

She took the lapels of Gerry's jacket one in either hand and pulled him slightly towards her.

'You're welcome,' Gerry said.

'I'd better be.'

'Now, Jimmy, you ought to be dry after all that socio-oh-so-so. Glass forward.'

Jim took hold of his glass and held it fiercely where it was. A solid fist.

'Go on, Jim, he means to be friendly,' Flaveen said. 'It's just that he doesn't understand. Have a drink with me.'

She put her fingers on the rim of the glass. Plump, white fingers, cherry pink nails.

The glass came easily out of Jim's hand.

'You want to relax a bit,' said Flaveen. 'You want to forget that old book stuff sometimes.'

'I can when I want to,' Jim said.

'You need a little sweetening up, that's all,' said Flaveen. 'Like this.'

She reached for the big aluminium sugar caster in the middle of the table and raised it above Jim's head.

A few grains fell into his wiry hair.

'Hey,' he said.

'And a bit more,' said Flaveen.

A thin stream of white crystals.

'Stop it, won't you,' said Jim.

He jumped up.

Flaveen scrambled on to her chair. A glimpse of a plump rounded knee.

Sugar from the caster scattered on the floor and table. Jim ran out of range. Flaveen jumped off the chair and ran after him, the caster poised.

Jim reached the door, left it swinging on its hinges. Flaveen close behind him. The sound of their voices outside in the corridor, receding and getting louder again outside the windows. Feet running in the darkened garden. The sound dying away.

'Youthful high spirits, youthful high spirits,' said Mr Applecheek.

'Not quite my idea of a Zen student,' said Honor.

A question.

'A little lonely perhaps,' suggested Mr Applecheek. 'I believe these courses do attract people from a social as much as from an intellectual point of view.'

He paused.

'What we find convenient to call a social point of view,' he said.

'The common little thing,' said Miss Rohan.

She seemed surprised at her own words.

'I feel that one should have some background to tackle a subject like Zen,' she added. 'The poetry, the fancy. It implies something stable to compare it with.'

'The poet Yuan-Wu,' said Mr Utamaro.

Pointedly.

'Ah, yes, the poet Yuan-Wu,' said Honor. 'The one who recommends stealing the farmer's ox. I'm almost as interested in him as Mr Henderson is. And I'll tell you why. Because of that sword up in the room there.'

‘That dreadful sword,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘I can see you can’t keep it out of your mind either, Mrs Manvers.’

‘Well, I’m not exactly obsessed with it,’ Honor said. ‘But I can see something worth looking into there. And one point in particular rather intrigues me.’

Mr Utamaro sitting impassively at the head of the table with its litter of half-empty glasses.

‘And what is that?’ he said.

‘Just this,’ said Honor.

She leant suddenly forward and looked at Mr Utamaro intently.

‘Just this: if you advocate the views of Yuan-Wu, why do you go to such trouble to prevent any poor man taking away the Zen master’s sword?’

‘A shrewd hit, a shrewd hit,’ said Mr Applecheek.

He patted the table in front of him in approval.

Honor still looked intently at Mr Utamaro.

‘A certain discrepancy between theory and practice, isn’t there?’ she said.

‘But surely it’s a simple duty to keep a dangerous weapon like that safely locked away,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Well, Mr Utamaro,’ Honor said, ‘are you going to answer my question?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Zen teaches us that the poor man must never take the farmer’s ox.’

Gerry laughed.

‘I’m sorry Jimmy boy isn’t here to hear you,’ he said. ‘He’d have a blue fit.’

The sound of running feet outside. Gasping laughter.

In a moment Jim pushed the door open. His head was encrusted with a gleaming white mass of sugar. Grains fell from him with each movement.

‘She bombed me,’ he said. ‘Bombed me with the whole caster from above.’

Flaveen came in. Not running. She smiled at Jim and went back to her place. She sat still. With a puzzled look.

‘You wait,’ said Jim.

‘Poof,’ she said, ‘don’t let’s have any more running about I want to sit still for a moment and think.’

‘Think,’ said Gerry, ‘what are you going to use for that?’

‘Wait till I’ve got this muck out of my hair, that’s all,’ said Jim.

‘I’d go out and put your head under the kitchen tap,’ Gerry said. ‘You’ll find plenty of willing hands to help out there, too. What we used to call a nice bit of frat.’

‘Listen to him,’ Honor said. ‘To hear him talk you’d think he’d fought all the way from Normandy to Berlin. You and Monty both, I suppose. Do you know what he did in the war?’

She looked round the table.

‘I’ll tell them,’ said Gerry. ‘I was what you’d call Divisional Controller of the local black market. Doing my bit. Seeing the little doggies and little catties didn’t go without their nice chopsy-wopsies. They wanted to give me an O.B.E. but I told them I was too modest.’

‘The thing is,’ said Honor, ‘that that’s not a lie. It’s what he did do, more or less. And I married him. And I tell you what -’

She looked round the table again. A challenge.

‘I suppose you found yourself very busy in those dreadful days, Father,’ Miss Rohan said to Mr Applecheek.

Rather too loudly.

‘Busy days,’ Mr Applecheek said, ‘busy days, indeed. The bishop had to go even so far as to call on my services, although always in a temporary capacity. In some ways I was happier when I had a cure, but what is not to be is not to be.’

‘Ah, I’ll have to go up and get a wash,’ Jim said. ‘There’s a mirror in my bedroom where I can see what I’m doing.’

He walked across to the door leaving a wide trail of sugar. At the door he turned and looked back at the others round the table.

Alasdair, who had been sitting with his head plunged in his hands, suddenly got up.

He followed Jim out.

‘Good idea,’ he said, ‘need a wash.’

‘Life and soul of the party,’ said Gerry.

Just before Alasdair reached the door.

But he took no notice. He left the door open behind him and they saw him walking rapidly in the direction of the hall and the stairs.

‘Will you be back at nine o’clock?’ Mr Utamaro called. ‘At nine o’clock Major Francis always makes announcements. I must make some too. He left strict instructions.’

Alasdair walked on. Mr Utamaro looked dismayed.

‘I’ll go and tell him,’ said Flaveen.

She ran along the corridor after him. The others watched her turn the corner at the foot of the stairs.

‘He looks to me as if he was going for a long solitary walk,’ Gerry said. ‘Can’t understand him. You’d think he was canned, but he’s only had a couple of glasses. Gerry’s been counting. You’ll have to do without him for your announcements, Utey, he’ll be plunging through the night, mark my words.’

*

But Gerry was wrong. At ten minutes to nine Alasdair walked in.

‘Still sitting round drinking,’ he said. ‘I thought this was a temple of learning. Plain living and high thinking, what?’

‘Got to start with a party,’ Gerry said. ‘Not that’s it’s been much of a party this last half hour or so. What they call “just

conversation”.’

‘Where’s that girl, anyway?’ Alasdair said. ‘She told me there was going to be some sort of parade for announcements, and she’s late. Doesn’t do to be late for parade, you know. Always telling my boys that. Put ‘em in detention. That’s the thing. Are you going to put that girl in detention. Mr Utamaro?’

‘If it is time I am going to fetch my list of things to say,’ answered Mr Utamaro.

As he left Flaveen came in.

‘Have I missed what you were going to tell us?’ she said.

‘It will be in just a few minutes,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Would you care for a peppermint?’ Alasdair said to Flaveen as she flopped down in her chair.

‘No thanks ever so.’

‘Then I think I’ll take one myself. Good for indigestion, you know. Very necessary after the appalling cooking they rise to here. Anybody else stricken?’

He passed the box round. Nobody took any.

The door opened again. Mr Utamaro came in with Jim. Jim walked down towards the others. Mr Utamaro stood at the doorway. He was not carrying a list.

‘Ah, all present and correct,’ Alasdair said.

Jim looked at him quickly.

‘Is it a parade we’re having?’ he said.

‘Just a few announcements as I understand it,’ Alasdair said. ‘I don’t think there’s any reason to display the well-known Irish passion for anarchy.’

‘You’re very aggressive all of a sudden,’ Jim said.

‘I simply happen to appreciate the difficulties of running any sort of academic show,’ said Alasdair. ‘Certain announcements always have to be made, and people ought to be present to hear them.’

‘But tonight,’ Mr Utamaro said, ‘there will be only one announcement.’

Everybody turned to look at him.

A new note. Something serious.

The two rows of deal table that had been in use at the far end of the room near the door to the kitchens.

Complete silence.

Mr Utamaro in his thin black kimono standing looking at the group of westerners. His broad face and easy stance, feet planted firmly on the ground a little apart, arms hanging relaxedly at his side. Eyes bright with force.

‘One announcement only,’ he said. ‘It is about the Muramasa sword.’

‘That sword,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘I was afraid there would be some trouble about it.’

‘Trouble?’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Why do you think there is trouble

‘Is nothing wrong then? You looked serious.’

‘You don’t know what is wrong?’ Mr Utamaro asked.

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Miss Rohan.

Candour.

‘Then I will tell you,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The sword has gone.’

Chapter 4

'But it's -' said Flaveen.

'Gone?' said Honor. 'What do you mean? Do you mean it's been stolen?'

'It has gone,' said Mr Utamaro. 'I do not know where it is. Does anybody here know anything about it?'

Silence. Glances out of the corners of the eyes.

Honor looking at Gerry, puzzled. Gerry looking sharply round from face to face, a sparrow. Miss Rohan not looking from face to face, looking inwards to a world where this was not possible.

Alasdair pulled his glasses from his pocket, placed them firmly across his thick aquiline nose and inspected each face in turn. The headmaster.

Jim Henderson: a quick angry glance round and a shrug. Mr Applecheek: a slow mild gaze and a gesture of despair. Flaveen: blank.

Honor got up and walked up the room towards Mr Utamaro.

'There's something I want you to do,' she said.

Words weighed.

The others looked at her. She ran the tip of her tongue along her scarlet upper lip. A calculation.

'Look,' she said, 'you're absolutely certain the sword has been stolen?'

'Some extraordinary things happen with these Far Eastern religions,' said Alasdair. 'I was reading a book about Tibet the other day-'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro.

The bullet head on the broad shoulders shot forward. From under the bushy black eyebrows he glared at Alasdair.

‘No, you have not understood. Zen is not a religion. Zen is not trickery of that sort. Zen is using the whole consciousness. Nothing more.’

Spitting words.

‘Listen,’ said Honor, turning back to Alasdair.

A note of weary contempt.

‘Listen, that sort of thing doesn’t happen. Books about Tibet come out every other month. Publishers get someone to wish them up when they’ve nothing better to do. No, there are only two possible explanations of this business.’

‘I don’t suppose you’ve read-’ Alasdair said.

‘Either it’s a publicity stunt,’ Honor said, ‘or the sword really has been stolen. In which case it’s a police matter. But, first, listen to what I propose.’

‘All the same-’ said Alasdair.

‘Look, chum,’ Gerry said, ‘pipe down. The great Honor Brentt is at work. If you’ve never seen it before, just watch.’

‘Shut up, Gerry,’ said Honor, ‘this is serious.’

‘It’s serious,’ said Gerry. ‘She means it’s something good for *The World*.’

‘All right, what if it is? If this is a stunt there’s no harm in it being handled properly. You won’t be able to pull the wool over my eyes for long.’

She looked at Mr Utamaro.

‘The sword has been stolen,’ he said, ‘but the showcase is intact.’

‘Just as I thought,’ said Honor. ‘An inside job. And I suggest that there’s no need to call the police. I’ll sort it out for you. It only needs a trained mind. You don’t go looking into phonies and culture rackets half your life without learning something. Let it ride, and when the time comes I’ll tell the story.’

Mr Utamaro standing motionless by the door looked at her.

‘But surely,’ said Alasdair, ‘if a crime has been committed the police must be told.’

‘Why did you come on this course?’ said Honor.

‘I came for a perfectly legitimate reason,’ Alasdair said.

‘All right,’ Honor said, ‘and I came to write a piece about it for the paper. I’m not ashamed of it.’

Snapping.

‘Now, besides “a perfectly legitimate reason”, why did you come here?’

‘I came because I consider Zen is one of the most important trends in world thought,’ Alasdair said.

‘All right. And you want to know more about it?’

‘Of course.’

‘And you think a lot of flat-footed policemen mooching around the place are going to help?’

‘Well, I suppose not, but -’

‘Exactly. And is anything going to be lost by waiting a few days and leaving things to me?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Good. Anybody else any objections?’

She looked round at them.

‘None in the world, dear lady, none in the world,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Of course, a clergyman should object. He is expected to obey the conventional moral code. But everyone knows all clergymen are weak.’

‘I’m sure there will prove to be some simple explanation,’ Miss Rohan said.

Mr Utamaro walked back to the table and sat down in his place at the head of it. Carefully he brushed aside some crumbs.

‘There is no such thing as stealing,’ he said. ‘There is no mine and thine. A sword is not a sword. We will see what

happens. Tomorrow we will have sanzen. One by one you will come to see me and we will try and break out of the coils which entwine you. Who knows, at the end the sword may be seen.'

'Using Zen tactics to get at the truth,' said Honor. 'It might help. I'll sit in with you.'

'That is not the way,' said Mr Utamaro. 'We will not have time to look for the sword while we are looking for ourselves.'

He stood up.

'But you may get some evidence,' Honor said.

'There is no such thing as evidence,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Look for the sword if you like, but I do not think you will find it. Perhaps you have hidden it yourself.'

He turned abruptly and strode towards the door.

'One moment,' said Honor.

His hand on the door handle, he stopped.

'One moment. You talked about holding these interviews - I forget what you called them.'

'Sanzen.'

'You talked about holding sanzen interviews tomorrow. All right. But it's still early. Why can't we investigate the plain facts tonight? Facts are what we want, a few facts. When was the sword last seen? How exactly do the security precautions work? Tell me that, and I'll tell you what happened to the sword.'

'I wonder,' said Mr Utamaro.

He grinned at her.

'Follow me,' he said.

The others got up and went after him. They went upstairs, past the meditation hall and on to the little room where they had been shown the sword that afternoon. Mr Utamaro stopped outside it.

'Now,' said Honor, 'this door, was it locked?'

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘a lock does not stop a door being opened.’

‘You could be right at that,’ said Honor. ‘Okay. Let’s go in.’

She jerked open the door and held it wide for Mr Utamaro. He went in and the others crowded after him.

The dusty room. Bare boards, faded wallpaper. The torn patch. A single low-power electric light bulb hanging from a fraying wire. And immediately under it the showcase.

Unchanged. The glass intact. Not so much as a scratch on the painted metal base or the legs. The black velvet smooth and unruffled except where a faint indentation showed the exact place of the sword.

Everything as before. But no sword.

They stood and stared at the showcase.

Honor got down on her knees and looked under it.

‘No sign of any damage here,’ she said. ‘What’s the combination, Mr Utamaro?’

‘The makers know it, Major Francis, who is trekking, as he calls it, in northern Norway knows it, and I know it,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Honor, squatting on the floor, looked up at him.

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ she said. ‘It would only confuse the issue.’

She got up and looked at the case again.

Then she put out a finger and gently rested it on the edge of the glass.

At once the deafening alarm filled the room with stultifying clamour again.

Mr Utamaro went to the combination lock, turned the dial, opened the small trapdoor in the base of the case and switched off the bell.

‘Seems to be in working order all right,’ Honor said. ‘But I suppose if anybody had opened the case in the orthodox

way the alarm would have reset itself when they closed the door again.'

'That is what Major Francis told me would happen,' Mr Utamaro said.

Honor strode to the uncurtained window and peered out into the blackness. Then she half turned to face Mr Utamaro.

'You haven't a great deal of faith in what can be done by logic, have you?' she said.

'I have no faith in logic at all,' Mr Utamaro said.

He grinned. The squat castles of his teeth.

'Yet there must be some explanation,' Honor said.

Testily.

'Oh yes,' Mr Utamaro said, 'it is easily explained.'

'Well?'

'I told you earlier today how it had been done.'

'What?' said Honor. 'Are you telling us that the whole thing is some sort of Zen demonstration?'

'Everything is some sort of Zen demonstration,' Mr Utamaro said.

'Oh, all right,' said Honor. 'But please answer a straight question. Have you had the sword all along? Is the whole business a fake?'

'I have not got the sword,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Then, for heaven's sake, what's your explanation?'

'It's simple. The goose is in the bottle. How are you to get it out? There it is: out.'

Honor raised her hands high in despair.

'Oh no,' she said. 'We'll have to do better than that'

Mr Utamaro grinned.

'If we can't get at it mechanically,' Honor said, 'we'll get at it another way.'

'All this class of talk is a hell of a waste of time,' Jim said. 'The sword's gone. What does it matter? We could be

getting on with something useful. I've got a big programme for this week.'

'Anxious to get away?' said Honor.

'Yes.'

'I wonder why?'

'I've already explained why. I brought a good many books down with me and I want to get through them. I can't afford to waste time.'

'You seemed perfectly happy to waste it earlier this evening chasing all over the place.'

'That was my private affair.'

'I wonder.'

'What do you mean?' Jim said.

A darker tinge to his reddish cheeks. A truculent stance.

'All that chasing in and out. It would give you plenty of time to nip up here and take the sword.'

'What the hell would I want with a sword?'

'We'll come to that. The point at present is what were you doing at the time the sword was stolen?'

'And when was that? Perhaps you happen to know?'

'I don't.'

'Then maybe you'd better find out.'

'All right,' said Honor, 'we will find out. And we'll see how you look then.'

'Go ahead.'

'We all saw the sword in its case this afternoon,' Honor said. 'Did anyone see it later?'

She looked round at them. Poker faces.

Jim still red and defiant. Miss Rohan distant. Mr Applecheek vague. Alasdair virtuous. Flaveen wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Gerry grinning.

'I saw the sword just after tea,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Say six o'clock?'

'Yes.'

‘And you found it missing about nine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now I want you to think,’ Honor said. ‘Did anyone stay in the company of other people the whole of that time?’

‘Did you?’ said Jim.

‘No, I didn’t. I don’t attempt to conceal it. I went up to my room before dinner and Gerry wasn’t there.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘I went up then too. But it was only to tidy up.’

‘You were alone though?’ said Honor.

‘Naturally.’

‘Then you can’t prove that you didn’t come down here and take the sword?’

‘I couldn’t possibly have done that.’

‘Ah, that’s a help. Why do you say that?’

‘Because I wouldn’t have understood about the alarm. Some women, of course, can do all that is necessary with electrical things, but I was brought up to leave the repairs to the people who came to do them.’

‘That’s not what I was asking,’ Honor said. ‘I was asking if you could prove that you had no opportunity, no opportunity at all, of coming in here.’

‘No, of course, I can’t prove that. Why should I be able to? But I still couldn’t have managed the electricity, you know. In many ways I wish I could. They charge so much nowadays, and I know they take advantage of one. They resent having to come and do the work.’

‘But you did have the opportunity?’

‘If you insist upon it.’

‘Anyone else got an alibi?’

Silence. Then a stir of relief. All in the same boat.

‘Now where do you go?’ said Jim.

‘To bed,’ said Mr Utamaro.

A decision.

‘Tomorrow you will need all your strength,’ he said. ‘We are going to do something difficult. Tonight sleep.’

*

‘*Aber* -’ said the plump, dark girl.

‘*Aber, aber, aber*, but, but, but,’ said the blonde. ‘If they do not want to fetch the police, why should they? The showcase is meant to be burglar-proof, so it must have been one of them who took it, let them sort it out between them.’

‘Nevertheless it is their duty to call in the police.’

‘Pfui. Duty. But all the same they might have suspected us a little bit.’

‘But, no,’ said the dark one. ‘We are above suspicion. We did not know about the alarm bell working at just a touch, and we were together all the time yesterday.’

‘I know that. I know all that. But we are missing the excitements.’

‘Excitements. But that dangerous weapon is hidden, perhaps, somewhere in the house. If at home my parents knew . . .’

‘Just now I went into the library,’ said the blonde. ‘The room Mr Utamaro calls the meditation hall -’

‘But it is private now. They are all in there.’

‘Of course. But I took with me a broom to pretend it was the morning for cleaning the room, and when I saw them I said, “Oh, so sorry”.’

A curtsy bobbed. A smirk.

‘And what were they doing?’ said the dark one. ‘It is so *geheimnisvoll*.’

She looked over her shoulder fearfully.

‘Not *geheimnisvoll*, you should say “sinister”. You must read more light literature.’

‘But what are they doing?’

'I'll tell you. They are sitting in two rows facing each other, not saying a word, and looking very seriously at the ground. Except Mr Gerry. He is holding his squirt flower and looking at that. Ach, Mr Gerry, he is so -'

'Stop about Mr Gerry, always Mr Gerry. Was Mr Utamaro sitting there too?'

'No, I think he is in his room,' said the blonde.

'I wish we could know everything they do. Could you ask Mr Gerry, perhaps?'

The blonde's eyes lit up. Sparkling blue eyes.

'Well, I might, but you will have to wait. They are all still in the meditation hall and I can't go in again.'

'I wonder if they are saying anything now?'

*

'Well,' said Alasdair, getting to his feet, 'somebody's got to be first. He said we were to go and see him when we felt ready. I'm going in now.'

'Fancy, a human voice,' Gerry said. 'I thought we were all going to sit here on our whatsits till the cows came home. And I've forgotten what we were supposed to be thinking about.'

'The koan, Mr Manvers,' said Miss Rohan.

Icy.

'Yes, but I've forgotten what that is.'

'Well now,' said Mr Applecheek, 'so have I. I found myself day-dreaming about something quite different. But the clergy are chosen for their absentmindedness, as everyone knows.'

'The koan,' said Alasdair, 'is simply this saying: what is the sound of one hand clapping?'

'That's right,' said Gerry. 'I knew it was something barmy.'

'I happen not to think so,' Alasdair said. 'And now I'm going in for my sanzen.'

‘Come and tell us about it after,’ said Flaveen. ‘It’s giving me the creeps sitting thinking about it.’

Defenceless,

‘It may be against the rules,’ said Alasdair.

‘But do, all the same. Please do. I’m frightened of it. Really I am. If I knew what was going to happen it would be much better.’

She smiled at Alasdair. Wanly. Her smooth white skin and the thick tress of pale red hair over her shoulders.

‘We’ll see when I come out,’ Alasdair said.

He closed the door behind him with care and walked along the corridor to Mr Utamaro’s room next door. He knocked.

‘You may come in,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair went in.

The room was small. Once a housekeeper’s sitting room. Now bare and almost empty. It had a high ceiling in common with the other rooms on this floor, its ornamentation almost obscured by successive layers of whitewash. The walls were papered in a pattern of tight bunches of roses. The only window, tall but narrow, was curtainless. There was an iron mantelpiece with heavy decorative work painted all over in a yellowing shade of cream. The grate was empty. A single electric light bulb hung from the centre of the ceiling without a shade. The floor was bare boards, minutely clean. On it was a straw mat rolled up with scrupulous neatness with a small black lacquered box beside it. There were two kitchen chairs set in the middle of the room facing each other four feet apart.

On one of them Mr Utamaro was sitting. He got up and held out his hand for Alasdair to shake.

Alasdair looked at it, realized what was meant, put out his own hand.

Solemnly they shook hands.

‘Be seated,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He went back to his own chair and Alasdair sat down opposite him. Cautiously.

Alasdair pulled a white handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed at his face.

‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I look at it this way -’ Alasdair began.

Mr Utamaro shot forward.

‘Look at it another way,’ he said.

A command.

‘Another way?’

‘Yes, another way. Quick, hurry.’

Alasdair put out his right hand, groping. The chair solitary in the middle of the room.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘I came in here with my answer ready. I was perfectly prepared to cooperate. And what do I get? Shouted orders. I’m not a schoolboy, you know.’

Mr Utamaro laughed.

‘And what’s more,’ said Alasdair, ‘I think my prepared answer was perfectly satisfactory.’

The moth batters against the light shade. Bang, bang, tap.

‘I see you are determined to tell me what you have thought.’

‘Certainly I am. After all, I devoted a good deal of time to the matter. I came to a certain broad conclusion, and I feel I have a perfect right to formulate it in my own way.’

‘Be careful to choose the right words.’

The corner of the mouth twitching.

‘Very well,’ said Alasdair. ‘Then as I see it this koan – the sound of one hand clapping – isn’t intended to be answered directly at all. It is merely intended to evoke any reply, however inconsequential. It doesn’t matter what one says.’

‘So what do you say?’

‘Well, anything. It – it doesn’t matter what.’

‘So you say nothing?’

‘No, no. I don’t say nothing. I say anything.’

‘Nothing would be a good answer. But you don’t say nothing.’

‘No, I don’t say nothing. You don’t seem to understand.’

Mr Utamaro smiled.

‘I understand a little bit,’ he said. ‘But you must try to stop asking yourself what your answer to a question should be. You must ask yourself the question.’

‘That’s all very well,’ Alasdair said.

He leant back in his chair – the hard kitchen chair – pushed his legs out and settled his heavy spectacles on his nose.

‘Forgive me for putting it in this way,’ he said, ‘but I think you’ve got an unduly simple view of life.’

Mr Utamaro sat still.

‘You see,’ said Alasdair, ‘it’s not just a question of saying a thing to suit oneself. One doesn’t speak into a vacuum, you know. Anything I say, no matter how trivial, is really quite a complex matter. It’s compounded of not only myself, but the people who hear it and the time it’s said, and even the place. They all must be taken into account, and what one says adjusted accordingly.’

Alasdair held up his right hand. The policeman halts the flow of interruptions.

‘Now I know what you’re going to tell me. You’re going to tell me that this is lying. And I simply reply: of course it is. You see, lies are very necessary things. They’re the oil of human relationships. They’re civilization. Without them we’d be reduced to mere fighting animals.’

‘You were at the university, Mr Stuart?’

‘Yes, yes. I was. But I didn’t learn this theory there. I worked it out for myself. I’m no philosopher. This is simply what life has taught me. Up at Oxford I read history.’

‘And what else did you do there?’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Ah, I remember. You told us you played many games, not well but with spirit. And chess as well. But what else did you do?’

‘I didn’t learn any metaphysics, if that’s what you mean. And I thought Zen was more than a mere matter of juggling with words.’

‘Quite right.’

Mr Utamaro brought the palms of his hands together in a soft clap.

‘Did you take part in university rags?’ he said.

‘Rags?’

‘Yes, in the universities of the West students frequently indulge in acts of horseplay, often on a wide scale. Isn’t that so?’

‘Yes. Yes, it is. There are rags. But I don’t understand. We seem to be getting away from the subject.’

‘That is often the best way of getting there,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair’s eyes brightened.

‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘I must remember that. That’s pretty well Alice in Wonderland.’

‘So did you steal the sword as a rag?’ said Mr Utamaro.

Chapter 5

ALASDAIR looked at Mr Utamaro.

Agape.

'No, I did not take the sword for a rag,' he said.

Mr Utamaro grinned. The flash of broad teeth.

'I think you forgot to adjust that remark to your company,' he said.

'Perhaps I did,' said Alasdair. 'Sometimes one is stung by something and replies without thought.'

'You must watch like a tiger watching its prey,' said Mr Utamaro.

He got up abruptly.

'Let us see what is happening to the meditators,' he said.

Alasdair stood where he was when Mr Utamaro left the room. But before the Japanese had got to the double doors of the meditation hall he had caught him up.

'One moment,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Just before you go in there I've something I want to say.'

'Yes?'

'About the sword.'

'The sword,' said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair searched for words.

'I'm afraid I let that woman persuade me to leave the matter to her against my better judgement,' he said. 'To tell you the truth I don't much like the police not knowing about it.'

'Why not?'

‘I’ve been asking myself why the sword was stolen. That’s the key question, you know. And I can see no reason that I much like why any one of them should have wanted it.’

‘It is not a likable thing to steal.’

‘Perhaps not. But look at it this way. An object like the sword is not going to be very easily converted into money – especially by anybody not in touch with criminal circles.’

‘Yes, I had thought that the theft was probably not for money. But people sometimes act before they think. I even advise them to do it.’

Mr Utamaro gave a deep bark of laughter.

‘All right,’ said Alasdair, ‘but had you thought what the theft was for, if it wasn’t for gain?’

His voice sharp after the deep gurgle of Mr Utamaro’s laugh.

‘There are many reasons,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘The mind tangled in the dualism of logic is capable of the utmost illogicality.’

‘That’s all very well, but I tell you I can only think of one reason, one very nasty reason. And if I’m right, we oughtn’t to be messing about like this. We ought to be getting the police.’

‘Perhaps messing about like this will be more efficacious than the police,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘The theft may not be a matter for police procedure.’

‘You don’t want to fetch them in,’ said Alasdair. ‘And I think I can guess why. If this is made a police matter the news of the theft will eventually come to the ears of the warden and you don’t want that to happen.’

‘It would be much better if the sword was in its case when Major Francis returns,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘That is why there may not be time enough for the police.’

‘All right,’ said Alasdair. ‘But I’m warning you. The only reason I can think of for someone stealing the sword is because it is sharp. I can’t stay silent for ever.’

Mr Utamaro turned and opened the double doors.

The meditators had a less formal look than when Alasdair had left them. Gerry had taken his chair and put it behind Flaveen's. He sat on it back to front and was swinging his squirt flower by its rubber tube above her pale red hair. Flaveen was looking rather hot. She was sitting turned slightly away from Gerry with her arms folded defensively. Honor, sitting opposite her, was looking at her husband steadily. Her legs were crossed in a casual attitude, but her left hand was gripping hard on to the edge of her chair seat.

Mr Applecheek had, like Gerry, left his place. He had wandered over to one of the clumps of books on the mostly empty shelves and was immersed in a calf-bound volume. Miss Rohan and Jim Henderson remained in their places. Both kept the attitude they had all adopted when the meditation session had begun. They sat looking straight forward with their hands resting lightly on their knees. Miss Rohan, next to Flaveen, was sitting stiffly, her face showing plain disapproval of Gerry's attitude. Gerry occasionally swung his flower a little in her direction, but never very far. Jim's face too was taut. He might have been deep in concentration, except that his eyes moved restlessly.

'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' said Mr Utamaro.

Mr Applecheek looked up from his book.

'My dear chap,' he said, 'it's extraordinary that you should say that. Here am I ostensibly plunged deep in Bigg's *Christian Platonists of Alexandria* and what do I find running through my head but that absurd jingle. And now you come in and repeat it. Do tell me what it is?'

'It is a koan,' said Mr Utamaro.

'A koan. Now what - Oh dear me, yes. It all comes back to me. The koan was what we were meditating about. My dear fellow, how can I apologize? What a blessing the clergy are meant to be woolly-headed.'

Gerry picked up his chair and made a great show of scuttling back to his place.

‘Miss Rohan,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘what is the sound of one hand clapping?’

‘I – I was thinking about it,’ Miss Rohan said.

‘But I see no sweat,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He walked up to her and thrust his face towards hers. Miss Rohan moved back a little in her chair.

‘I don’t think that that will be necessary,’ she said.

Mr Utamaro looked at her gravely.

‘I do find my mind wander,’ she said. ‘I know it ought not to, but I will need some practice.’

‘Good,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He turned away.

And swung round again.

‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’

‘But really...’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Come, what is the sound of one hand clapping? I want an answer.’

‘It’s – It’s – But I don’t know what it is.’

‘You must answer.’

‘I can’t. I really can’t. I don’t know. I don’t understand.’

The edge of tears.

‘Don’t try to understand. Answer.’

‘But how can I answer? I really don’t know.’

‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’

Mr Utamaro stepped back a pace and looked down at Miss Rohan. His questions a rain of blows.

‘Answer,’ he said. ‘Answer. Answer now.’

Miss Rohan put out her right hand in front of her and agitated it once or twice.

‘Is it that?’ she asked.

Cowed.

'Is it?' said Mr Utamaro. 'Say what it is.'

'Oh, this.'

With sudden vigour Miss Rohan raised her hand high above her head and brought it swiftly down, palm towards the floor, until she stopped it with a jerk level with her elbow.

Silence.

Mr Utamaro smiled. His eyes cheerful.

Miss Rohan continued to hold her hand out in front of her. She looked at it with a puzzled expression.

Something not seen before, a new object.

Fingers moderately stubby, with the nails cut neatly. The cuticles carefully pared. No varnish or polish. The skin a little red and shiny, with two small cuts in it. The flesh softened by regular use of hand cream. The lines across the swollen knuckles deep. On the third finger a ring. A fine gold band in the form of a snake, its tail coiled round its neck. In its open mouth a single large emerald.

'Ooh,' said Flaveen, 'what a lovely ring. May I look?'

She caught hold of Miss Rohan's hand and gazed at the ring.

The plump white fingers. The stubby reddened ones.

'It's lovely,' Flaveen said. 'Is it something special?'

'It was an engagement ring,' said Miss Rohan.

She snatched her hand from Flaveen's. Then held it out again, briefly.

'It's ever so pretty,' Flaveen said. 'And you never married him?'

'No, I never married him.'

'He didn't die or anything?'

'Not until years after.'

Miss Rohan looked at Flaveen, still leaning forward to see the ring.

‘We found we couldn’t agree,’ she said. ‘He came from an old naval family, and when we had been engaged about six months he made up his mind to leave the service and farm. He said he couldn’t contemplate the long periods of separation while he was at sea.’

‘That’s lovely,’ said Flaveen. ‘Really lovely.’

She smiled.

‘Lovely?’ said Miss Rohan. ‘I didn’t think so.’

She lifted her head.

‘I still don’t think so. He had a duty to his country and a duty to his family.’

‘But if he was in love?’

The pained surprise. Innocence encounters reality.

‘His duty came first,’ Miss Rohan said.

The firm line of her mouth.

‘And what happened to him in the end?’ Flaveen said.

‘He was killed in action. He left me the ring I had given him back in his will. I’ve worn it ever since.’

‘May I have another look?’ said Flaveen.

Miss Rohan held out her hand again. Steady under inspection.

‘That’s an emerald, isn’t it?’ said Flaveen.

‘Yes.’

‘And it must be terribly valuable. It’s so big.’

‘It’s a good stone. But the setting is more valuable. It was originally eastern and the ring had been in his family for several generations.’

She turned and looked up at Mr Utamaro.

‘But I’m afraid that wasn’t a very good answer to the koan,’ she said.

‘It was an unexpected answer,’ he said. ‘It was worth hearing. But there must be answering in private as well as in public. Who will come and see me next?’

He looked round.

'Miss Mills?'

Flaveen did not answer.

'Miss Mills?'

'Not her, sir,' said Gerry. 'Please, sir, she didn't do it, sir.'

Flaveen looked up.

'Was it me?' she said.

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Are you ready to come and see me?'

'Oh, no,' said Flaveen. 'No, not yet.'

'Mr Applecheek then, I think,' said Mr Utamaro.

Mr Applecheek was sitting with his hands tightly clasped together staring into space. There was a slight flush on his lined cheeks. His eyes were unusually wide open. He looked up at the sound of his name, unclasped his hands and brought the tips of his fingers together.

'A clergyman is always supposed to set a good example,' he said. 'Civic duties and so forth.'

He got slowly to his feet. The aged limbs.

'Provided, of course,' he added, 'that the duties are not carried to the point of effective action.'

Mr Utamaro stood aside to let him go through the doors and closed them behind him. Together they walked along to the tall room where the two chairs faced each other on the bare floor.

Mr Utamaro ushered Mr Applecheek to the chair Alasdair Stuart had sat in and took the other himself.

'You were talking of duties just now,' he said.

Mr Applecheek waved his hand in a gesture of vague dismissal.

'One has to, one has to.'

'Mr Stuart was saying to me, as we were coming to see you just now, that he thought I was failing in my duty.'

'Indeed? He strikes me as a person who would have very definite notions of duty. An excellent young man, an

excellent young man.'

Mr Applecheek allowed his eyelids to sink down till his eyes were closed.

He opened them briefly. A glint of bright blue.

'But tiresome,' he said. 'Though as a clergyman I naturally don't say so.'

Mr Utamaro shot a finger out towards Mr Applecheek. Pointing.

'Are you a clergyman?' he said.

Mr Applecheek made no reply.

Mr Utamaro put both his hands on his knees and leant a little further forward. His head jutted forward, the two tufts of coarse black hair standing up with electric vitality.

He said nothing, but looked at Mr Applecheek with unwavering concentration.

A trace of a smile moved Mr Applecheek's lips.

'An interesting question,' he said.

Mr Utamaro did not move. Unblinking eyes under the shaggy black eyebrows.

'A question, indeed, that sets up a whole trail of speculation.'

No comment still from the tense figure. Dressed in a kimono, sitting on the edge of an old kitchen chair.

'Of course,' said Mr Applecheek, 'in the strict sense of fact, yes, I am a clergyman. Properly ordained in the Church of England. However, that is not quite what you wanted to know, is it?'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro.

The bare syllable.

'Well then, in the sense that the bishop has certain views about my capacity for parochial duties, I am not a clergyman. I admit it.'

He wagged a reproving finger.

‘But, look here, my dear chap,’ he went on, ‘I’ve no doubt that if I go on submitting to this sort of bullying I may undergo a spiritual transformation of some sort. I can see the way you are going. And I can see a great many unpleasant objects strewn along the path.’

‘Think of the goal,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Well, and when I do think of it, what do I see? A system totally at variance with the beliefs I have held for a lifetime.’

‘No, no,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘I think you are misunderstanding me. Even on purpose. I think you do not want to let me get behind your guard. You have too much to hide. So you attack me. I have practised judo, you know, I understand about fighting.’

‘Now what on earth is all this about?’ said Mr Applecheek. Mildness. Benevolence.

‘What on earth are you saying? Hiding things? What have I got to hide?’

‘A sword?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Oh, that sword. I had a feeling we wouldn’t go far without that sword coming to the fore. Well, this is all I have to say about the sword: it is an object which interests me when I can see it because I am interested in beautiful things.’

‘You are a collector then?’

‘No, not a collector. I am not interested in the possession of objects. I simply like to look at them. I am, if you like, a connoisseur.’

‘So it does not matter to you where something beautiful is so long as you can look your fill at it?’

‘I repeat. I entirely lack the collector’s instinct,’ Mr Applecheek said. ‘I am not a hoarder, not a hoarder at all. And now, my dear chap, you have utterly exhausted a very old man. I shall go and sit quietly in the common room and read the paper. A few uncomplicated facts will be refreshing – not that facts are exactly what the papers print.’

*

'Oh, that Mr Gerry,' said the blonde girl.

She sighed.

'Just now I saw him outside the library,' she said.

'So that is why all alone I have to peel the potatoes and have no one to talk English to,' said the dark girl.

'You could have come and talked to Mr Gerry.'

'*Ach, nein.* When he sees me it is not talking.'

'To me he only talks,' said the blonde one. 'Such things he says.'

'All lies.'

'But so funny.'

She stroked one of her plaits as it hung in front of her.

'At ten o'clock,' she said, 'Mr Utamaro is going to give a lecture on Zen and the art of flower arrangement. Mr Gerry is going to stay away. He told me so.'

'Then I am going to the village to buy four stamps.'

'You bought eight yesterday.'

'I need four more.'

'Oh, what lies. Everybody in this house tells lies all the time.'

'If other people do not speak the truth it is necessary also to lie.'

'You ought to say: it is necessary to lie too. In conversational English the word "also" is seldom used.'

'I do not care. I am going to the village.'

'There is no need to go yet. Mrs Manvers has just gone to see Mr Utamaro. She will keep him a long time. She talks such a lot, and everything she says is so exaggerated.'

'While her husband, I suppose, says nothing and is incapable of lying.'

'Oh, Mr Gerry. He is different. He can't help lying. But his wife, she does it on purpose.'

*

Mr Utamaro got up when Honor came in and held out his hand for her to shake.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘have you got anywhere?’

‘We are here all the time,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Here all the – Oh, I see. Zen. Look, I don’t want to be rude , but couldn’t we cut it out? There was a good deal to be said for coming in here like this to have a so-called whatsit – sanzen – but once we are alone, for goodness’ sake, let’s cut out the trimmings and get down to business. What have you found out this morning? And a straight answer, mind.’

She bumped down on the chair opposite Mr Utamaro, and immediately stood up again.

‘What have I found out?’ said Mr Utamaro.

He sat unmoving on the battered kitchen chair,

‘I have found out many things.’

‘Ah.’

Honor caught hold of her chair by its back, jerked it round until it was at right angles to Mr Utamaro and knelt on it looking down at him.

‘So you have got something to work on?’ she said. ‘I take it you don’t know who stole the sword, but tell me just exactly what you have got on to and we’ll be beginning to get somewhere. And don’t miss out a thing. Anything, anything at all, may be vital. Just tell me everything you have discovered.’

‘I have found out what I expected to find,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘That Mr Stuart, Miss Rohan and Mr Applecheek all have something to hide.’

‘All?’

Honor slipped off her chair with an ungainly movement and stood beside it, her long fingers tapping on the top strut.

‘Surely, they can’t all three ...?’ she said. ‘It doesn’t make
– No, let me think. You’re sure?’

‘Each one has something to hide,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘But it is nothing to be surprised about. So many people have things to hide. And you, Mrs Manvers, you have a great deal to hide.’

Honor’s fingers froze to stillness on the chairback.

Chapter 6

‘A Great deal to hide?’ Honor said.

She looked down at Mr Utamaro sitting relaxedly on his hard chair.

Unwilling respect.

Then a sudden hardening of the facial muscles.

‘What nonsense,’ she said.

She gave her chair an impatient jerk.

‘I’ve got nothing to hide. I gave up hiding things years ago, years and years ago. I gave it up. You know that. You heard me yesterday. I’m always like that. All my secrets, out they come.’

‘But you still have secrets,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Empty handed I go and behold a spade is in my hand.’

‘Oh, no.’

Honor placed both hands over her ears. Theatrical despair.

‘I told you to cut all that out,’ she said. ‘Listen, what we need is a little plain common sense, just that. No Zen. No Zen at all.’

Mr Utamaro looked up at her. His forceful eyes beneath the shaggy black eyebrows.

‘I know why you came here,’ he said.

‘Why I came here?’

‘Why you came here.’

‘What’s this now? Can’t you concentrate on the matter in hand? Always some new tack. If this is the working of a trained Zen mind, give me a trained sea lion.’

'But do you know what is the matter in hand?'

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'The matter in hand,' said Honor, 'is finding out who stole the sword.'

'We have other things to find,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Let me remind you, I know why you are here.'

'I'm here to write up this place, and when I think I've got on to a story worth having, you start all this fun and games.'

'To write up,' said Mr Utamaro. 'I have heard the expression. Do you know that to the Zen mind up is down.'

'Up is down? Oh, go on, let's hear the lot. I give in.'

Honor sprawled into her hard chair again.

'To write up is to write down,' said Mr Utamaro.

'To write down?'

'Yes. To place in a poor light, make fun of.'

'So that's what you think I came here to do.'

'Am I not right?'

Honor looked at her hands. The long, thin, nervous fingers.

'You are right as a matter of fact,' she said. 'There's no point in trying to disguise it. You can't very well send a letter to a place and ask if you can come down and make them look a fool, so I always ask if I can do an article about them. Write them up. But, fair enough, I came here to raise a laugh at your expense.'

'Perhaps we disappointed you?' said Mr Utamaro.

He smiled.

'Disappointed me?' Honor said. 'I hadn't really thought. None of these jobs is as good as it looks when you first get the idea. Otherwise I wouldn't be paid what I am for my column. It's a matter of knowing how to cut out the stuff which won't really go down, what you don't want for your purpose.'

'And sometimes how to improve a situation?'

'I never write anything libellous. I know better than that.'

'But if a place would look dull for your readers, you make some excitement? What is called a stunt? Yes?'

'A stunt.'

Honor jumped up again and went to the bare window. Long strides. She stood looking out.

In the empty room without so much as a clock on the mantelpiece, time passing.

'That tree out there must be pretty high.'

'The cedar of Lebanon,' said Mr Utamaro. 'It is very high. A noble tree.'

Honor swung round.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I started thinking of something else.'

'Or perhaps the same thing,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Mr Stuart was telling me just now that you had persuaded him to do something against his better judgement.'

'I wouldn't give a tinker's cuss for that young man's judgement. But what did I persuade him to do, for heaven's sake? I've hardly spoken to him.'

'You persuaded him that it was right not to tell the police about the sword.'

'Did I? I suppose I did. And now he's changing his mind, eh?'

'He told me he thought it was a very dangerous thing for such a sharp weapon not to be in its proper place.'

'Dangerous?'

'You think it is not dangerous?'

'I hadn't thought of it as a dangerous weapon,' said Honor. 'Why should it be dangerous? None of the people who could have possibly taken it is likely to want to use it as a weapon. Who would they use it on? This isn't a congress of sworn enemies. We're all strangers to each other, aren't we? You don't kill people you don't know. It's a fantastic

suggestion, absolutely fantastic. What on earth put it into his head to say a thing like that?’

‘You don’t think your husband stole the sword, then?’

Mr Utamaro’s stubby teeth flashing in a broad grin.

‘My husband? Why should he -? Oh, because he does know me. I can see you haven’t really worked out what makes Gerry tick.’

She padded round the little room. The high ornamented ceiling.

‘Gerry isn’t exactly the murdering kind,’ she said. ‘I must make him want to murder me at times. Or at least I try to make him want to. But with Gerry it doesn’t come off. He doesn’t care enough. Gerry’s got no feelings, no feelings at all. Can you understand that? Can you imagine it? A man without feelings. Because that’s what Gerry is. He’s cold. Icy, icy cold. He doesn’t care a damn about anyone, except Gerry Manvers.’

She stopped her abrupt walk, and turned to look at Mr Utamaro.

‘But don’t get the idea that I don’t love him,’ she said. ‘I’m obsessed with him. Obsessed. That’s the word, the only word. I never fell for anyone before. Honor Brentt was too clever, too busy to fall for anyone. And then I met Gerry. We’ve got nothing in common. Nothing. Except a few people we both happen to know.’

She walked rapidly over to the window.

‘That’s a fine basis for marriage, isn’t it?’ she went on. ‘To know half a dozen of the same people. That and the fact that I can’t let him go. I tried. I tried once. Only once. I told him to get out. And he went. He knew he had only to wait. He just said “Leave a message at the club” and he walked out – cheerfully. It didn’t shake him an inch. I was at the end of my tether, and he couldn’t have cared less.’

‘And sometimes you’d like to kill him,’ said Mr Utamaro.

A cheerful remark.

‘And sometimes I want to kill him,’ said Honor.
‘Sometimes –’

She wheeled round.

‘Don’t you know me by now?’ she said. ‘Do you really think that if I wanted to kill someone I would steal a sword one day to use it the next? Don’t be a fool. If I ever kill Gerry it’ll be with something I’ve picked up just that moment. But I won’t do that. Do you know why? No, not because I love him too much. My sort of love is hate half the time. No, I won’t kill Gerry, because he knows just when to run. To run away from his wife. And he’s not ashamed to do it. He’d do anything to save his own skin.’

‘Does he do any work?’ asked Mr Utamaro.

Placidity.

‘Work? Yes, he’s got a job in public relations. It consists mostly of standing people drinks on the clients’ money. He generally has some sort of a job like that, though they never last long. But he likes to have one: it gives him an excuse to go out on his own and enjoy himself, and a chance to pick up a popsy.’

Honor turned on her heel.

‘The sort of women he really likes,’ she said, ‘are brainless little fools. He married me for my money, for what I can earn. And he spends it too. Every last penny.’

She marched back to the window and stood, her forehead resting against the pane, looking out.

‘How high is that tree anyhow?’ she said.

‘It is higher than the house,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Honor did not move.

Mr Utamaro sat motionless on his chair looking at the door facing him.

Honor started to drum her fingers on the frame of the window.

‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ said Mr Utamaro.

The gentle question dropping into the silence.

Honor sighed.

‘You can’t always answer every question,’ she said. ‘I try to.’

Silence again.

‘That’s the principle of my life,’ Honor went on. ‘I try to answer every question as soon as it comes up, and to answer it out to the end. But you can’t do it all the time. Sometimes, just sometimes’ – the quiet voice – ‘I daren’t find out the answer. That’s when I behave the way the people I despise do. I don’t go probing on till I get right to the bottom, and into the false bottom. I stop. And I hope.’

She went on looking out of the window.

Then suddenly she turned round, went to her chair, adjusted it till it was facing Mr Utamaro’s, and sat down.

‘What was that question?’ she said. ‘The sound of one hand clapping. Do you ask me again, or what happens?’

Mr Utamaro got up and walked out of the room.

He left the door open behind him.

Honor blinked, laughed abruptly, and followed him out.

Mr Utamaro did not go back into the meditation hall, but opened the doors, stood at them, and said:

‘Now it is time for a lecture.’

He went on down the corridor and down the wide stairs without waiting for the others. They came out of the meditation hall and trailed after him.

At the head of the stairs there was a movement to separate.

Honor said to Gerry:

‘No, you don’t.’

Gerry, who had begun to walk along the corridor with Miss Rohan and Flaveen, turned and went down the stairs with

Honor.

Sheepishly.

In the hall the grandfather clock ticked loudly. Both its hands were stuck at six.

Mr Utamaro was sitting in the common room when the others arrived. On the trestle table in front of him were a small dull brown pottery vase, a spray of cherry blossom and a pair of scissors.

'Please be seated,' he said.

They trooped to the semicircle of canvas chairs and sat down.

'The warden was most insistent that during the course there should be at least one formal lecture a day,' said Mr Utamaro. 'He told me to call the roll. But I have left the little notebook he provided somewhere and I can't think where.'

He looked at them.

'Miss Rohan and Miss Mills are absent,' he said.

'They didn't come downstairs with us,' Alasdair said. 'Miss Mills didn't seem to be very interested in flower arrangement.'

'And the old battle-axe made out she had a headache,' said Gerry. 'If you ask me she was a bit put out because she thought she'd made a fool of herself over that ring. All during the last bit of meditation she was twisting about like she'd got - Oh, what was I going to say? Spare my blushes.'

'Sit down, Gerry, and stop making a bloody fool of yourself,' said Honor.

'All the same,' Gerry said, 'fancy the old trout turning out to have had the big romantic love affair. Not that that duty lark was all there was to it. I bet the old haybag was afraid of it when it came to the point.'

He looked at Honor. But she refused to react and he settled back on his chair.

‘Zen and the Art of Flower Arrangement,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He picked up the vase.

‘Let us look first at this,’ he said.

He handed it to Jim Henderson, who gave it a quick scrutiny and handed it on to Mr Applecheek.

Mr Applecheek looked carefully at the vase, holding it at the tips of his long, fine fingers. He shook his head sadly and passed it to Gerry.

Gerry made a play of poking his nose into the mouth of the vase, and gave it to Honor. A shrug.

Honor looked at it quickly.

‘Japanese?’ she said.

‘It came from Japan,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘There are many such vases made there, but they are too crude to be exported, so they are not often seen outside the country.’

Honor passed the vase on to Alasdair.

‘I’m very doubtful about all this,’ Alasdair said.

He put the vase back on the table without looking at it.

‘You will have observed without doubt, Mr Stuart,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘that the glaze on the vase has been allowed to run. Nature has been allowed her share in the making of this simple object.’

‘I didn’t observe it as a matter of fact,’ Alasdair said. ‘My attention was directed to something a little more important than a cheap vase.’

Mr Utamaro handed the vase back to Alasdair.

Alasdair held it in front of him. Pouting mouth.

‘The glaze has been allowed to run,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘in what might be called a controlled accidental fashion.’

‘Very interesting,’ said Alasdair.

‘That is why we prize such an object,’ Mr Utamaro went on. ‘They remind us that we are not the One, that we depend on the Other, that the two are one and the one two.’

‘So you admit the existence of the world,’ said Jim.

The teeth clenched. The words allowed to escape.

‘Zen admits nothing else,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘But it is a pity Miss Rohan is not here, because it is this aspect of Zen that has attracted the artists of the west. It is the intentionless intention of Zen art, or of objects like this vase, which has been seized on by the action painters, with their use of the accidents that occur as they work. Reality, we say, is not the one mind working alone but the fusion of the mind and all that is outside it.’

Alasdair got up and put the vase back on the table in front of Mr Utamaro. With a thump.

‘The moon shines on the water,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘the water reflects the moon. What is exactly there? The-moon-in- the-water. Without the moon it is not, without the water it is not. Together it is the moon in the water.’

‘All right,’ said Alasdair.

The loud voice. Aggression.

‘All right, let’s look at it from your point of view. You want to take into account the facts outside your mind, is that it?’

He leant forward glaring at Mr Utamaro. From his waistcoat pocket he produced a peppermint tablet, slipped it into his mouth, and began to chew at it. Champing.

‘That is an aspect of Zen,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It is a way of trying to teach the unteachable.’

Alasdair swallowed the last of his peppermint with a gulp.

‘Very well then,’ he said. ‘There’s your mind.’

He pointed at Mr Utamaro.

‘And here’s a fact.’

He looked round at the others.

‘Here’s a fact,’ he repeated. ‘Somebody has stolen a very unpleasant weapon from this very house. Somebody in this very room.’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Honor.

Snapping.

'All right,' said Alasdair, 'two of us are absent. Include them if you like. But it doesn't alter the facts. And that's what you're trying to do. To alter the facts so that you can pretend that this extremely serious incident is something that you can use for your own childish purposes. Well, just don't be too clever. Something very far from childish may happen with that sword before we see the end of it.'

'Now what exactly makes you say that?' said Honor.

A pounce.

'I'll tell you what makes me say that.'

Alasdair stood up and looked down at Honor.

'I say that because I was brought up to obey a few very simple rules. Very simple but eminently practical. And one of them was: always keep weapons in a place of absolute safety. Whether it's guns or a sword the rule applies.'

'We don't all of us have the advantage of being brought up in the murky Highlands, Mr Stuart,' said Honor.

She jumped to her feet and faced him.

'For some of us,' she said, 'the sword is simply a civilized objet d'art. We don't all go about sticking things into each other.'

'That's not particularly funny,' said Alasdair. 'And as a matter of fact I happened to be brought up in a part of the world where people were only too ready to use weapons. It's easy to make fun, but I happen to know the sort of thing people can do to each other when weapons get into the wrong hands. And that's why I ask once more: does anybody intend reporting the theft of the sword to the proper authorities?'

'At the end of the morning,' said Mr Utamaro, 'everyone will have submitted to the sanzen interview. Then we shall see.'

'If you think you're dealing with people who will succumb to mystical third degree of that sort, you've got another

think coming,' said Alasdair.

'It's one way of solving the problem,' Honor said. 'And a better way than you might think. Nor, may I remind you, is it the only step we are taking.'

'No,' said Alasdair, 'we're in the hands of the great Honor Brentt, we all know that. Well, I for one don't have any great faith in those hands. Does anybody agree with me? Let's put it to the vote. Which is it to be? Honor Brentt or the properly qualified police?'

'Do you know,' said Mr Applecheek, 'I am going to be thoroughly irresponsible and vote for Miss Brentt. To tell you the truth, Stuart, I rather resented your remarks about your fellow students. Surely I am just the person to succumb to mystical third degree? I dislike the imputation that there is too little in me of the otherworldly, indeed I do.'

'Is anybody in favour of fetching in the police?' said Alasdair.

Almost a shout.

No replies.

'Then I leave you to it,' Alasdair said. 'And when someone gets hurt don't come crying to me.'

The solid door did not quiver after the slam.

'Plastered, if you ask me,' said Gerry. 'Stinko from the neck up.'

'Not at all,' said Jim. 'Your man is the sort who would pride himself on not touching drink before sundown. It's simply a case of inflated arrogance.'

The trap mouth.

Gerry got up and took the squirt flower from his pocket. Carefully he tried its effect entwined with Mr Utamaro's cherry bough. Sadly he shook his head, untangled the rubber tube and put the flower back in his pocket.

'All the same,' he said, 'I wonder what has happened to that sword. It would hurt if you sat on it.'

Chapter 7

Flaxen plaits flying. The blonde girl running down the winding drive towards the village. Eyes alight.

‘Quick, quick, come quick,’ she said.

‘Was ist das? Is it the sword?’

The dark girl stopped in her walk towards the house. The blonde one ran up to her, leant against her shoulders with her arms round her neck, panting. Giggling.

‘Mr Gerry.’

The dark one threw off the other’s arms.

‘Mr Gerry. Mr Gerry. Mr Gerry,’ she said. ‘Always Mr Gerry.’

‘But he has just gone to see Mr Utamaro. Think of it.’

‘I hope he will be told what is good behaviour. As I went to the village he blew that whistle with the paper at me.’

‘He has never done that to me,’ said the blonde.

Downcast.

‘I wish he would never do it to me.’

‘But – Do you think we could climb the big tree on the lawn and see into Mr Utamaro’s room? I think it would be possible.’

‘Ach, nein?’ said the dark one.

‘But then we could see -’

‘And we could be seen. We would be sent home. What would my parents say?’ ,

Perhaps you are right,’ the blonde said. ‘It must be sad always to be so good. And afterwards Mr Gerry will tell me lies, I know he will. So we shall never hear what happened. Oh, Mr Gerry.’

*

When Mr Utamaro held out his hand Gerry shook it enthusiastically.

‘How do you most frightfully do?’ he said.

Mr Utamaro sat down on his old kitchen chair and gestured towards the one placed opposite it.

‘What no cushion?’ said Gerry.

He sat down gingerly.

After a short silence Mr Utamaro said:

‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’

‘No,’ said Gerry, ‘not me, chum. Not bright enough, you know.’

‘That is all the better,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Intelligence is a great trap. It makes us look for what we think ought to be there, not what we would see if only we looked without thinking.’

‘Look, old boy,’ Gerry said. ‘Get it straight. I didn’t come here for any of this Zen stuff. I came here because my charming, intelligent and delightful wife threatened to cut off the cash if I didn’t. No curiosity about the mysterious east, no passionate desire to change my life. Just a row with the missus. She’s crazy about me, but she doesn’t trust me. She found out about one of my little goings-on. You know what she did?’

‘I will believe it whatever it is,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘She hired a private eye, a ruddy detective. To find out what I did all day. I told you she was crazy, didn’t I? Well, that’s what she is: plumb crazy. Anyhow this snooper saw what she thought he would see, more or less. Little Gerry shut up in his office after hours having a bit of slap and tickle with one of the girls. So there was a big row. Quite unnecessary really. It was more because I was sort of sorry for the kid. She was lonely: she’d left home, she hadn’t a real friend in the world. I just took an interest.’

He looked at Mr Utamaro.

Mr Utamaro sat silently.

‘All right,’ Gerry said. ‘That’s the only way I know how to take an interest. I wouldn’t be very good at being a big brother, or a nice old second dad. But it’s true, she’s all on her ownio, and if I got something out of it I gave her something too. Anyhow afterwards little Gerry wasn’t to be trusted all by his little self at home for a week. Might have brought the creature back and sullied the old nuptial couch. Though as a matter of fact she’s left the office.’

‘So you have the advantage of coming here not expecting to find something mysterious, something important.’

‘You’re beginning to go way above my head again.’

‘Am I?’

‘Yes, you ruddy well are. And now you’re trying to needle me. Well, it won’t wash. Other people have tried to needle Gerry Manvers and he’s learnt all about letting it ride. So you might as well give up. You won’t get me to spill any beans about your old sword that way, because as it so happens there aren’t any beans to spill.’

‘To needle you. I think I see what you mean. A graphic expression. It means you think I believe you stole the sword and that I am trying to irritate you into telling me. But why should you get that idea into your head?’

‘I didn’t get it into my head. You put it there. And how it got into your head I wouldn’t like to say. Why the hell should I pinch your sword? Did you think of that?’

‘Because the sword is not a sword but a tweeter, perhaps. Or a flower that squirts?’

‘One of Gerry’s little tricks, eh? You’re wrong, you know. If the sword isn’t a sword it’s just a lump of old metal as far as I’m concerned. And if you want to find it, take a piece of absolutely disinterested advice. Ask the padre. He’s a snaky old boy, make no mistake. Nice, big, dirty secret all stowed away there. Of course, he’s scatty a bit too. I don’t like to

think what he will do with the sword now he's got it. Look at the way he climbed that -'

Gerry stopped. Fixedly looking over Mr Utamaro's shoulder out of the window.

'Just a moment,' he said, 'I think I saw my wife.'

He got up and went quickly across to the window.

'There must be something in the air,' he said, 'if I'm right. It sends everybody completely round the bend, I supp - Yes, come and look at this.'

Mr Utamaro joined him at the window and looked out.

Slightly above them Honor Brentt was climbing the cedar of Lebanon.

They could just see her face. Eyes staring, mouth taut, shiny with sweat. She was climbing in a series of short rushes, fixing on a target above her and getting to it almost without looking for a route. The branches of the huge tree swayed and creaked as she lunged at them and an irregular shower of pieces of loose bark and leaves fell as she scraped and pushed her way up. When she had reached each target she stood or crouched for a moment gripping tight. Once she wrapped both arms round a thick branch and closed her eyes. But after an instant she looked up again, fixed her next objective, and started a wild scrambling assault on it.

They watched in silence as she climbed to the level of the floor above them.

'What's got into her?' said Gerry. 'She isn't safe doing that. She won't generally stand up on a wall even. She's got no sense of balance. She must be mad.'

'She has reached a state where something like this is the only course she can see,' Mr Utamaro said.

Gerry turned on him.

'Zen,' he said, 'I thought it was a ruddy game. If she kills herself doing that...'

'She has done it herself,' said Mr Utamaro.

He stayed watching the swaying, scrambling figure above them.

Sweat on Gerry's upper lip, running down into the thin line of moustache.

'I'm going to shout to her,' he said.

Seeking support.

'Shout then,' said Mr Utamaro.

Gerry started to push the window. His fingers slipped on the brass hooks. He stopped, stood back and looked at Mr Utamaro. Piteously.

Mr Utamaro opened the window. Gerry leant out, twisting upwards to see his wife.

'Honor, Honor,' he shouted.

She stopped her wild assault on the tree abruptly. Her hand clutched at a branch above her and missed it. She swayed forward.

At the window Gerry went suddenly white.

Honor fell heavily against a bigger limb and lodged where she was.

Gerry drew a deep breath.

'Honor, what the hell are you doing?'

A snarl of anger.

She crouched clinging to the limb in front of her and said nothing.

'Look,' said Gerry.

He spoke loudly and there was no doubt Honor could hear him.

'Look, have you got some idea into your head, or what? I know you don't like doing that. Tell us what's happening.'

Through her clenched teeth Honor gave a quiet moan.

The sun came out from behind a cloud and the fitful April breeze quietened. The scene was suddenly still.

A painting. The mellow walls of the house, the deep green of the cedar, the blue sky with a large whitish cloud drifting almost imperceptibly across it, the level turf of the lawn a lighter green than the tree, a few splashes of purple where the irises were in bloom along the wall of the house. An undistinguished but pleasantly colourful water-colour.

And in the tree, Honor. Her long legs in fawn trousers askew, the vivid orange of her blouse.

‘Now then, pet, get a grip on yourself,’ Gerry called. ‘You’ll make us all wet ourselves in a moment, really you will. You just don’t look safe. Give us a break, tell us what you’re playing at.’

Honor began climbing again.

Gerry pulled his head in from the window and stood looking away from it.

‘She’ll be safe,’ he said. ‘She must be. If she’s got that far without coming to any harm, she’ll go the whole way. There’s nothing to worry about. She’s okay, absolutely okay.’

Mr Utamaro, looking out of the window, started convulsively.

Gerry wheeled round.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, no, no.’

Then he stopped and glared at Mr Utamaro.

‘Why did you do that?’ he said. ‘It’s nothing to joke about. She’s all right still.’

‘But she is in danger, and you know it,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It may be possible to catch her with some help. The branches will check her fall a little.’

He hurried from the room.

Gerry leant quickly out of the window again and called up at Honor.

‘Just wait till you get down.’

He ran after Mr Utamaro.

They found the rest of the party sitting in the common room unaware of what was going on.

‘Come out quickly,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘Mrs Manvers is climbing the cedar and she is going to fall.’

‘But she’ll be hurt,’ Miss Rohan said.

She got up, decisively, and led the others out.

‘What is she doing it for?’ Alasdair said. ‘Tree climbing can be very dangerous.’

They hurried through the hall. The clock’s angry tick.

‘Don’t ask me what she’s doing it for,’ said Gerry. ‘This damned Zen nonsense has turned her barmy if you ask me.’

On the lawn they stood looking up into the tree. At its base the spreading branches were still. Stone carved. But higher up the smaller limbs jerked and swayed as Honor moved them. She was nearing the top and no longer finding substantial footholds.

‘Honor,’ Gerry called again. ‘Honor.’

Once more she stopped.

‘She’s safer like that for a moment anyhow,’ Alasdair said. ‘But I don’t like it.’

He removed the spectacles from the wide bridge of his nose.

‘She’d be a bloody sight safer if she’d never come here at all,’ Gerry said.

‘Someone ought to go up after her,’ said Miss Rohan.

She stood looking into the dark green branches, her feet slightly apart, firm set. Stocky and assured.

‘She won’t want to come down,’ she said. ‘If she’s to be safe at all someone who can tell her what to do must go up. She’ll never look beneath her to pick her way now. She’s panicked.’

Nobody spoke. Above them Honor clung to her precarious hold.

‘Come, Mr Manvers,’ Miss Rohan said, ‘you’re a tree climber, didn’t you say? Something about a Tree Climbers Club. She’d listen to you. Shin up and get her down. If she’s left too long she’ll do something foolish.’

‘Me, go up there? She may be crazy, but I’m not.’

‘I thought you were used to climbing. It doesn’t look particularly formidable.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Gerry said. ‘There isn’t any Tree Climbers Club, and I’m not going to go up.’

Tongue flicking at the lips under the pencil line of moustache.

‘Well, will someone else go?’ said Miss Rohan.

‘All right,’ said Alasdair.

He walked slowly towards the tree, peering up at the wide branches.

‘You should know about this, Mr Applecheek,’ he said.

Jocular. Anxious.

‘My dear chap, just be quick,’ Mr Applecheek said.

He looked up at the tree and round about him, clasping and unclasping his long fingers.

‘Just climb,’ he said. ‘Looking neither to left nor right.’

‘Here goes then,’ said Alasdair.

He went up to the tree trunk, paused, and then swung himself without difficulty on to the lowest limb. He straightened up, stood balanced for a moment, and then reached for the next branch.

His progress was rapid and soon the tree was shaking towards its top as he neared Honor.

Below him the others craned up watching. Nobody moved and nobody spoke. Above him Honor too was silent and still. She clung tight to her holds. Rigid, metallic.

A big fleecy cloud slowly covered the sun and a slight chilly breeze made the spiny leaves of the tree stir.

Alasdair stopped climbing.

‘Mrs Manvers,’ he said.

His voice was quiet but it came clearly to the watchers below.

Honor made no reply.

‘Mrs Manvers, this is Stuart. You looked to be in difficulties, so I thought I’d come up and guide you down.’

No answer.

‘Mrs Manvers, can you hear me?’

Alasdair waited for a moment and then cautiously climbed a little higher. The thin branches at the tree top shook.

‘Mrs Manvers. Mrs Manvers.’

Alasdair edged a little further up.

‘Mrs Manvers,’ he said, ‘open your eyes. This is Stuart. Just below you.’

‘I can’t. I can’t.’

On the ground it was difficult to hear her.

‘Take it easy, Mrs Manvers,’ Alasdair said. ‘I’m just coming up alongside you.’

He began to climb again. The tree shook.

‘Don’t, don’t,’ screamed Honor. ‘Don’t. I shall fall. I shall fall.’

Tense silence. Then Alasdair said:

‘Just hang on.’

A ripple of urgency in the soothing words.

Near the top of the tree Alasdair’s blue blazer was visible thrusting upwards through the dark green leaves towards Honor’s bright orange blouse.

Below Mr Utamaro moved swiftly round the immense trunk, looking up steadily, slightly crouched. Gerry, his moustache wet with sweat, stood rigid, looking down at his feet. Miss Rohan looked up, without wavering.

‘She must be out of her mind,’ said Flaveen.

‘Don’t worry yourself,’ Jim said. ‘We’ll likely catch her.’

He kept his eyes on the tree top, shading them with his hand against the light of the sky.

They could hear Honor whimpering and the threshing of the branches.

Mr Applecheek went and stood beside Flaveen.

'The tree is not one that presents great difficulty to the climber,' he said.

'No,' Flaveen said, 'I know. But she's crazy. She won't think . Oh. Oh, no.'

The topmost branch of the tree, pointing to the sky, suddenly dipped sharply from the vertical.

Flaveen covered her face with her hands.

Chapter 8

A Moment of complete silence. A long moment.

Then Alasdair's voice.

'All right, Mrs Manvers, I've got you.'

Triumphant and soothing.

Flaveen looked up. Mr Utamaro looked down.

Above them Alasdair began helping Honor down the tree. Soon she was not far from the ground. Alasdair cradling her in a stream of instructions.

'Mind that big hole in the trunk. The wood looks completely rotten round it. Swing out a bit at that branch. That's right. Carefully does it. Now, lower the right foot. Yes, this cavity goes down almost eighteen inches. Full of loose tinder. That's it, left foot to that crook. And down ... And down ... Now jump.'

Honor was standing in front of them.

Gerry went up to her.

'What the hell did you want to do that for?' he said.

Honor looked at Gerry. She blinked and shook her head wearily.

Her pallor showing through the make-up.

'Can't we forget it?' she said.

Miss Rohan stepped forward.

'You look exhausted,' she said. 'You had better come and lie down for a while.'

'I shall be all right,' said Honor.

Some returning vivacity. A faint snub.

'You're not going till you've answered my question,' said Gerry.

'What right have you to question me? Did you go up that tree? Did you? Did you?'

'What's so clever about going up a tree?' said Gerry. 'Monkeys climb trees.'

Unabashed.

'So that's your attitude,' said Honor. 'You watch someone else rescue your wife and all you can do afterwards is jeer. You may think it puts you one up again, but don't kid yourself. We know now. We all know. Everybody knows. Gerry Manvers didn't dare climb the tree.'

'Come off it,' said Gerry.

He slipped his cigarette case out of his inside jacket pocket and took out a cigarette. He waved the open case round in invitation.

Nobody accepted.

Gerry snapped the case closed, tapped the cigarette on it, put the cigarette in his mouth, lit it.

A cool puff.

'Come off it,' he said again. 'I didn't climb the tree, and good luck to me. But you did. And that's where the trouble started.'

Honor turned to Alasdair.

'I want to thank you for what you did,' she said. 'And I want to tell you why I made such a fool of myself.'

'My dear Mrs Manvers,' said Alasdair, 'it really - '

'I was testing,' said Honor. 'I'm scared of heights, you know. I always have been. And I happened to be looking at that tree just now, and I thought if I could climb it it would break me of the fear habit before this balloon stunt.'

She looked up at the tree. The dark green tip straight now against the puffy white of the clouds.

‘Fear is seeing what isn’t there,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Zen is seeing what is there. Whether it is solid ground’ – he paused – ‘or a sword.’

He looked quickly round at them. Eyes beneath the bristling black eyebrows, keen, darting, searching. Seeking prey.

Glances at the ground. Hands moving uneasily.

Back again.

‘So who will be the next to come and see me?’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘Not me,’ said Flaveen.

Quickly.

‘You take her,’ Gerry said. ‘She’s beginning to crack up already. Five minutes of the treatment and you’ll have her yelling for mercy. She’ll confess to anything.’

‘Shut up, Gerry,’ said Flaveen. ‘You’re kidding.’

Bolstered confidence. A blush began spreading over her peach thick skin.

‘You’ll see when he gets you in his chair,’ Gerry said. ‘It’s a funny feeling. Not really painful, just sort of nasty.’

‘Stop it, Gerry.’

The arm twisted too far.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘It’s only having a conversation. Mr Manvers, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

‘Not a hope,’ said Gerry.

He grinned.

‘Mr Utamaro, may I come to see you next?’ said Miss Rohan.

Squared shoulders.

‘Certainly,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He ushered her towards the house.

Flaveen plumped down on the bench at the edge of the lawn, her skirt, a wide blue one today, fanning out round

her. Mr Applecheek walked up to the trunk of the tree and peered up into the cool depths of its branches. Gerry flipped his cigarette into a flower bed.

Mr Utamaro walked beside and a little behind Miss Rohan up the broad staircase of the house, along the corridor, past the double doors of the meditation hall – its bookshelves with the clumps of neglected volumes – and into the little room with the high ornamented ceiling and the faded wallpaper with the tight bunches of roses.

The two chairs were as they had been when he and Gerry had hurried out to fetch help for Honor in the tree. Mr Utamaro pointed to the one nearer the door.

‘Please be seated,’ he said.

Miss Rohan sat down. The right hand smoothing the worn tweed skirt as she sat, an unconscious gesture. Taught and never forgotten.

‘I am sorry you missed the lecture on arranging flowers,’ Mr Utamaro said when he had taken his seat opposite her. ‘Partly because when Major Francis gets back he will ask me why my lecture was not fully attended, but mostly because I think it would have interested you.’

The gap between them. Three feet of bare floor.

‘I was very sorry to miss it,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘It sounded as if it would have been most interesting. But I had such a wretched headache I knew I ought to lie down until it passed off.’

‘You are often ill?’

‘No,’ Miss Rohan said, ‘I’m really very robust. I couldn’t keep on unless I was.’

Mr Utamaro leant forward abruptly, shooting his bullet head towards her. A compressed spring.

‘Miss Rohan, why have you left off your ring?’

‘My ring.’

She looked down at her hand. The reddened skin, the spare flesh. And where the snake ring had been earlier in the morning a dull red line round the finger. Ineffaceable.

She blushed. Then sat up straighter in the old kitchen chair.

‘I decided not to wear it,’ she said.

‘And until today you had worn it for years.’

Not a question, a statement.

Miss Rohan hesitated an instant.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I have always worn it. But I decided to leave it off. I didn’t think anybody would notice, though as a matter of fact Father Applecheek noticed it. He has all the kindness of the old school of clergy, don’t you think?’

‘Miss Rohan, why did you leave the ring off?’

‘I –’

Miss Rohan stopped. She stood up.

‘I don’t think we can usefully discuss my personal affairs,’ she said.

Mr Utamaro stayed sitting down. The scratches on the varnish of his chair.

‘Take your place again,’ he said.

A moment of stillness. The scrubbed boards of the little room, the high ornamented ceiling. The empty fireplace. The curtainless window. Mr Utamaro’s straw mat neat in its corner, beside it the black lacquered papier-mâché box. Frugality.

Miss Rohan sat down.

‘When you told me about the ring I caught you by surprise,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It is sometimes the only way.’

Miss Rohan swallowed.

‘I certainly didn’t mean to tell all that story. And in front of that girl too.’

‘There were once two monks who were under a vow not even to look at women,’ Mr Utamaro said.

The dreamy sing-song story-telling voice.

‘One day they came to a stream and at the edge there was a pretty girl unable to get over. The first monk went up to her and without a word picked her up and forded the stream with her on his shoulders. At the far side he put her down and went on with his journey. The second monk at first would have nothing to do with him, but after a while he caught him up and asked him why, in spite of his vow, he had helped the girl across the stream. “What,” said the first monk, “are you still carrying that girl?.”’

Miss Rohan sat silent for a moment.

‘I suppose I do attach too much importance to what people are,’ she said. ‘But I was brought up to notice the differences between people and I continue to do so, even in these democratic days.’

‘Miss Rohan, why are you afraid of looking at yourself?’

‘Looking at myself? I don’t think I can be said to be afraid of that. My father used to say to us children that we should “see ourselves as others see us” and I think I can say that I do that. I have faults, I fail in my duties sometimes, but I think I can say that I recognize the fact, and endeavour to amend it.’

‘When we lift a stone in a fine monument,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘under it we see insects crawling.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t see – ‘

‘The insects are there because the stones of the monument are there. The one depends on the other.’

‘Mr Utamaro, I’m afraid I don’t at all see why you have to speak about anything so unpleasant.’

‘Miss Rohan, did you steal the sword?’

Dead silence.

Miss Rohan slowly got up.

‘I always had my doubts about whether I should have come here,’ she said.

She turned and opened the door.

'You haven't answered my question,' said Mr Utamaro.

Unbudging.

Miss Rohan turned to face him.

'I come of stock which regards stealing as impossible,' she said.

'And you did not steal all the same?'

'I have given you my word.'

'But did you steal the sword?'

'No.'

'Good.'

Mr Utamaro got up and bowed. Miss Rohan closed the door.

*

'Oh, what a liar is this Mr Gerry,' said the dark girl.

'He is no worse than others,' said the blonde one.

'No worse. He says he belongs to a tree climbing club and he will not climb the cedar to rescue his wife.'

'That is a lie, if you like. But he is not the only one here to tell lies.'

'The others may tell lies, but at least they are not cowards,' said the dark one.

'Mr Gerry may be afraid of climbing trees, but at least he is gay.'

'He is too gay. Straight away after the tree climbing he passed me in the corridor and gave me a pinch.'

'Oh, oh. A pinch. You are so lucky. Where was it?'

'I shall not say.'

A flounce.

*

Flaveen screamed.

Jumped up from the stone seat, warmed now by pale spring sunshine, her mouth a round O, and screamed.

‘Did I startle you?’ said Mr Utamaro.

Standing beside her, the sunlight making the black kimono appear blacker, smiling and bowing slightly from the waist.

‘I only asked if you were ready to come and have a talk with me,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I was miles away, really I was. I heard a voice say “Are you ready to come?” and I looked up and I saw a black figure. I thought it was – I don’t know what I thought.’

‘Your mind is full of thoughts of terror,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He took Flaveen by the arm and walked her across the smooth turf of the lawn towards the house door.

‘I wonder why,’ he said. ‘You expect the sanzen interview to be held in a torture chamber. You see Death standing at your elbow. It is all most mysterious. And yet, you know, you are wise to think of death sometimes.’

‘Death?’ said Flaveen. ‘You give me the shivers. I don’t usually go around thinking of things like that, you know. I can’t imagine what came over me just now.’

‘No, we have yet to find that out.’

They went into the house. The heavy front door standing open. The sudden dark of the hall after the clear sunlight.

Alasdair Stuart was standing looking at the notice-board with its yellowing scraps of paper.

‘Is it time I put up some more notices, Mr Stuart?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Eh?’

Alasdair spun round.

‘What’s that?’

‘Major Francis asked me to keep everybody posted all the time – that was the phrase he used – but I am afraid it has

got neglected, already.'

'No, I was just glancing at the board, just glancing at it,' Alasdair said. 'I wasn't really reading the notices.'

'Oh, Alasdair,' said Flaveen. 'I didn't get a chance to say this when you got down from the tree, but I wanted to. I think you were wonderful, really I do. The way you just went right up to the top.'

'The top of what, Miss Mills?'

Reversal.

'The tree,' said Flaveen. 'The tree on the lawn, the one Hon - Mrs Manvers went up.'

'There was nothing particularly wonderful in that,' said Alasdair.

He turned and left them. Feet heavy on the stairs.

'Well,' said Flaveen when he was out of sight, 'what did I do?'

'That is the wrong question,' said Mr Utamaro.

'The wrong question? '

'The question is: what has Mr Stuart done?'

'Done? I don't quite understand.'

'No? Well, perhaps you will. But we must get along.'

They began to climb the stairs.

But Flaveen was not to face her sanzen yet.

As they got to the first turn Miss Rohan's voice came up from behind them. Agitated, urgent.

'Mr Utamaro, Mr Utamaro.'

Mr Utamaro turned and looked down the stairs at her.

She looked put out. A few hairs out of place in her usually relentlessly neat coiffure. Her hands clasping and unclasping.

'Oh, Mr Utamaro, I must tell you at once. Something terrible's happened.'

'Terrible?'

Mr Utamaro hurried down the stairs.

'Yes,' Miss Rohan said, 'it's - it's-'

Suppressed tears.

'Come,' said Mr Utamaro, 'you must tell me.'

'It's my ring,' said Miss Rohan. 'Mr Utamaro, it has completely vanished.'

Chapter 9

‘Vanished?’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘That is impossible.’

‘But – but I tell you it has vanished,’ Miss Rohan said.

Tears in her eyes now.

‘A large emerald and a small quantity of gold do not vanish,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘The most that can happen to them is that for some reason or other we no longer see them.’

Miss Rohan sat down on the bottom stair and put her face in her hands.

She bowed back.

‘Not that now,’ she said. ‘Not logic chopping.’

Mr Utamaro put a hand on her shoulder.

‘It is not logic chopping,’ he said.

No trace of harshness in his voice.

‘We have just to remember at all times, in moments of joy and in moments of despair, that we are capable of deceiving ourselves. That if we are not constantly on our guard, especially at a height of stress, we trick ourselves into thinking things which are not so. Then we plunge deeper into the tangles of our own making.’

‘Don’t worry about him,’ Flaveen said. ‘He can’t help talking that way. What he means is: you may have thought the ring has vanished when it’s still there. But even if it has been taken I –’

‘But I looked,’ Miss Rohan burst out. ‘It can’t still be there.’

‘It may be there as Miss Mills has suggested,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Though that is not quite what I was saying.’

He grinned at Flaveen.

‘What I was saying was that the ring cannot have vanished. It is somewhere, though perhaps not where Miss Rohan left it. It is important to remember that. Because it means that it can be found. There is no need to despair.’

Miss Rohan stood up.

‘You’re perfectly right, of course,’ she said. ‘It was foolish of me.’

She took out a handkerchief and blew her nose.

The scent of eau-de-Cologne.

‘Where did you leave your ring anyhow?’ said Flaveen.

‘In my mackintosh in the little cloakroom by the front door,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘I didn’t like to leave it in my room. There was nowhere I could lock it up, and one never knows with servants.’

‘So you thought you would hide it?’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Major Francis asked me to announce that valuables could be put under lock and key in his office. But I never thought about it till this moment.’

‘I did hide it,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘I put it in a place where no one would think of looking for anything. I thought it would have been perfectly safe.’

An unsteadiness in the voice again.

‘Did you look in both pockets of your mac just now?’ said Flaveen. ‘It’s ever so easy to make a mistake like that.’

‘Naturally I thought of that,’ Miss Rohan said.

Asperity overcoming hysteria.

‘You will have to take my word for it that I made an absolutely thorough search. I am unaccustomed to being slipshod.’

‘Why did you go to the coat just now?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I had come in from the garden,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘And I thought about the coat. I went to it just to check. I put my hand in the pocket to feel the ring. And I found it had gone.’

‘So you knew which pocket it was in and went directly to the place?’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘Yes. The right hand pocket has a little place for tickets inside it. I had put the ring in there.’

‘Then I think Miss Mills is right. You had better go and look once more. Your first search was conducted under the impression the ring had gone. You had convinced yourself of that before you began to feel in the other pockets. You were not willing to find it. You should look with a clear mind.’

Miss Rohan sighed.

Impatience.

‘Very well,’ she said, ‘if you wish it I will go through the pockets again,’

She marched away.

‘Stop,’ said Mr Utamaro.

She turned. The word of command.

‘You are determined not to find it,’ he said.

‘Determined? But the ring is precious to me. Why should I be determined not to find it?’

‘Because you have not yet disabused yourself of the notion that it has been taken by someone,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Empty your mind of such thoughts, and if it is there you will find it.’

Miss Rohan looked at him steadily. Then she said:

‘Yes, I think I will be able to find it now. It may be there.’

Mr Utamaro and Flaveen standing on the bottom stair watched her go. Mr Utamaro looked at Flaveen.

‘Come with me,’ he said. ‘I want a word with you.’

Rapidly he led her up the stairs and along the corridor. The swish of his kimono.

He ushered her briskly into his own room and shut the door.

‘Sit down,’ he said.

He took the other chair before Flaveen had sat in hers.

'Now,' he said, 'what do you know about this ring?'

'The ring?'

'Yes, the ring. Hurry up, we have no time to waste. Miss Rohan will be looking for me in a moment.'

'Then you don't really think it's in her coat all the time?'

'How can I know? But if it isn't someone has taken it.'

'It may have dropped through a hole in the pocket. She may have forgotten she put it somewhere else all the time.'

'She will think of looking now.'

'All right, and if she doesn't find it I suppose someone has pinched it, so what?'

'So you must tell me at once what you know about it.'

'Why should you think I know anything about it?'

'Because you were going to tell Miss Rohan just now on the stairs that, if the ring had gone, you thought you knew where it was.'

Flaveen looked at him. Wide eyes.

'But I didn't say anything.'

'Your words were "But even if it has been taken I - " and then you were interrupted,' said Mr Utamaro. 'If you had had time to think you would not have spoken, and so you have already convinced yourself you said nothing. But what is put before my ears I hear. It was to your credit that you were going to speak. You were distressed by the spectacle of Miss Rohan on the verge of tears. She is not a woman to cry easily. So you began to tell her that the ring could be got back. Only she interrupted you, and gave you time for second thoughts.'

'All right,' said Flaveen, 'you've caught me out. But I haven't done anything to be ashamed of. I haven't stolen the ring, if that's what you're thinking.'

'No, I wasn't thinking that,' Mr Utamaro said. 'I was watching you when Miss Rohan told us about the disappearance, and I don't think you did steal it. But that is

by no means the end of the affair. You have still something to tell –'

Hurried footsteps tapping on the bare boards of the corridor. A sharp knocking at the door.

'Too late,' said Mr Utamaro.

He got up and in four quick strides was at the door. He opened it. Miss Rohan was standing outside.

'It really has gone,' she said. 'I looked all over the coat. I looked on the floor of the cloakroom. I asked myself carefully if I could have put it somewhere else without realizing it. But I know I didn't. Mr Utamaro, what shall I do? First the sword and now this. Something terrible is going to happen if we don't do something.'

'What shall we do?' asked Mr Utamaro.

He beckoned Flaveen out of the little room.

'Perhaps Miss Mills will be able to help us,' he said.

'It's very kind of her,' Miss Rohan began, 'but I think all the same-'

Her attention wavered, and she turned to the head of the stairs. Mr Applecheek peered round the corner.

'Ah, Miss Rohan,' he said. 'I caught a glimpse of you a moment ago hurrying along at a great pace with every appearance of distress. I came to see if I could be of assistance – and, of course, to satisfy vulgar curiosity.'

Miss Rohan took two steps towards him.

'Oh, Father,' she said, 'I'm in such trouble. You remember I told you I had put my ring in the pocket of my mackintosh – and that proves I did do it – well, I went to put on the coat just now and I found the ring had gone. I can't understand it. I thought it would be safe there. I hadn't told anybody where it was. How could they have known?'

Mr Applecheek smiled.

'You told somebody what you had done,' he said.

'No nobody, Father.'

He wagged at finger at her.

'You told me,' he said. 'And I thought to myself: if she has told me, sooner or later, she'll tell everybody else and the ring will no longer be safely hidden away. So -'

He dipped two fingers into the pocket of his rusty black clerical vest.

'So I took the liberty of anticipating the theft.'

The ring held up between two bony fingers. The emerald catching the light, glowing.

'Oh, oh, I ought to have thought,' said Miss Rohan.

She held out her hand for the ring. Impatience betrayed.

Mr Applecheek bowed slightly and handed it to her.

'How silly I've been,' she said. 'I feel quite angry with myself.'

She held the ring in her fingers swivelling it round.

Abruptly she straightened her shoulders. A decision.

'And I was silly to stop wearing it,' she said. 'You are quite right, Mr Utamaro. Self-consciousness. At my age.'

She smiled, and slowly slipped the ring back on to her finger. Settling into the red groove.

'Oh,' said Flaveen, 'I'm so glad. Really I am.'

She looked quickly from side to side. An escape route. Then she pulled a frilly handkerchief from the top of her skirt and blew her nose with it.

'I thought I was going to cry,' she said.

'It's no time for tears,' said Miss Rohan.

She patted Flaveen rapidly on the forearm and walked away along the corridor.

Her head carried high.

Mr Applecheek put his hands together palm to palm. He looked at Mr Utamaro.

'Between us,' he said, 'we seem to have done a good deed.'

He turned to watch Miss Rohan go round the corner at the far end of the corridor.

‘Though I wish all the same,’ he said, ‘that she would stop calling me Father.’

He wandered towards the stairhead, looking down into the hall below, scratched his left ear, shrugged and went down the stairs.

‘Well,’ said Flaveen, ‘so there wasn’t any theft after all.’

Mr Utamaro smiled slowly.

‘No,’ he said. ‘The good Mr Applecheek anticipated it.’

‘It gave me quite a turn at the time,’ Flaveen said. ‘And now it’s all over.’

She walked towards the stairs. Swaying on her high heeled sandals. When she got to the stairhead Mr Utamaro said:

‘Except that the sword is still missing.’

Flaveen stopped. Her hand on the carved newel post.

She giggled.

‘I was quite forgetting the sword,’ she said.

‘I do not think the sword is easily forgotten,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Come here.’

The soft voice.

Flaveen stood her ground. On the newel post her fingers tightly gripping the carved wood. The gleaming dark oak and the plump white fingers with their splashes of deep pink nail varnish.

Mr Utamaro looked at her without speaking.

She walked back towards him. He opened the door of his room and held it wide for her.

‘I don’t have to –’ she said at the threshold.

She went back in.

Mr Utamaro closed the door and pointed to the chair near it. Flaveen sat down. She tucked her feet under the chair and held on to its sides.

Mr Utamaro sat opposite her.

'We still have a lot to tell each other,' he said.

'I don't know,' said Flaveen.

She glanced behind her at the door. Two steps away.

'I haven't got anything to tell you, I'm sure,' she said.

A toss of the head. The pale red hair changing colour as it swirled.

Mr Utamaro grinned suddenly. Stubby teeth.

'So you were glad that Miss Rohan found her ring so quickly?' he said.

Flaveen looked puzzled. A neat frown on the smooth skin of her forehead. The child faced with the unexpected question.

'I was glad,' she said.

Feeling her way.

'All right, I was glad,' she went on. 'She's not my type, but you could see she was hit by losing that ring. And I felt it was my fault in a way. With me drawing attention to it and everything. Anyhow, I don't see why I shouldn't have been glad. You can see she hasn't been used to things not being easy.'

'So you admire Miss Rohan,' said Mr Utamaro. 'And you admire Mr Stuart.'

'Mr Stuart,' said Flaveen. 'I don't know about that. I can't quite make him out. One moment he's ever so friendly and the next he's chewing your head off. No, I don't really like him, if you want to know.'

'You think he has resisted you?' said Mr Utamaro.

Flaveen smiled. Eyelashes fluttered briefly.

'If you like,' she said. 'He didn't look as if he wanted to at first, but if he isn't interested that's okay by me.'

'There are other fish?'

'I should hope so.'

'Mr Henderson?'

‘I like him,’ said Flaveen. ‘He’s the quiet type. But he notices a girl. And he warms up all right after a bit. Actually, I admire him, if you want to know who I admire. Underneath he’s ever so romantic.’

‘But Mr Manvers is not the quiet type,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Hey,’ Flaveen said. ‘You’re very interested in my private life, aren’t you?’

‘I am very interested in everybody’s lives,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Flaveen sat silent for a moment. Counting the score. Then she said:

‘That’s all very well. If you found out I had a record or anything, I could see what you were getting at. But all these questions about who notices a girl and who doesn’t, I don’t see where they fit in. You’re not going to get your old sword back that way, not in a million years.’

Mr Utamaro did not answer.

‘Well,’ said Flaveen, ‘aren’t I right?’

‘If your secret isn’t to do with you and the other people on the course – and you insist so strongly that it isn’t – then perhaps it is to do with you and the sword,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Who said I had a secret?’

‘Come, we don’t have to go over all that again. You thought you knew who had stolen Miss Rohan’s ring. No doubt you think the same person stole the sword.’

‘But Miss Rohan’s ring wasn’t stolen.’

‘Whether it was stolen or not is not the point. You thought it had been, and you thought you knew who by. Now tell me.’

‘I can’t,’ said Flaveen.

An air of primness.

‘You could if you would, but you can’t?’

‘That’s about it, I suppose.’

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'You know who stole the sword,' he said. 'Or at least, you think you do. Good. Here we are sitting quietly opposite each other in this little room. You have a tongue: I have ears. And you cannot tell me.'

'No,' said Flaveen, 'I can't.'

She smiled slightly. Cat and cream.

'You think you can't,' said Mr Utamaro.

'But if I did I'd have to tell you who told me, and I swore I wouldn't. I can't just go and break my word.'

'You can,' said Mr Utamaro. 'It is only a word.'

Flaveen's mouth set in a stubborn line. The full lips generously reddened.

'But you don't have to,' Mr Utamaro said. 'You can tell me what you know and we will leave how you got to know it until you begin to see things in a different light.'

'Suppose I won't tell you a thing.'

'You will tell me.'

Flaveen pouted.

'How do you know?' she said. 'I don't have to if I don't want to.'

'No, you don't have to if you don't want to,' said Mr Utamaro.

He leant an inch towards her.

'But, of course, you do want to,' he said. 'Otherwise you wouldn't have given me all these mysterious hints. They are intended to whet my appetite, you know. So I am sure there is a good meal coming.'

'Well, I can tell you who stole the sword, if that's enough of a meal for you,' Flaveen said.

'It will last for the time being like any other meal.'

Flaveen looked wary.

'Listen. I won't say a thing if you try and find out how I knew. I promised I wouldn't say, and I won't. It might get

someone into trouble for all I know.'

'I would like to get the sword back, that is all,' said Mr Utamaro

'Oh, you'll get it back all right.' said Flaveen.

Careless confidence.

'You'll get it back, only you might have to wait a bit. Depends what happens.'

'So you feel you have influence over the thief?' said Mr Utamaro.

'Never mind what influence I've got,' Flaveen said. 'You'll get your sword all right. I promise you that. And don't go thinking you can work out who took it by who I could make give it back.'

'That won't be necessary. You are going to tell me that.'

'I might not, you know.'

'Now, stop playing. The name?'

No question of refusal.

Flaveen tossed her head. The shimmer of pale red hair.

'It was Jim Henderson, if you want to know,' she said.

'Ah,' said Mr Utamaro, 'the admirable Mr Henderson.'

'Well,' Flaveen said, 'he's got guts to do a thing like that.'

'Yes, if by "guts" you mean what I think you do, he has admirable qualities. But tell me, what exactly did he do to get hold of the sword? How did he defeat the locksmiths?'

'I don't know exactly,' Flaveen said. 'But I do know that he did do it.'

Fagerness to convince.

Mr Utamaro raised his eyebrows. The tangle of coarse black hair.

'He was seen as a matter of fact,' Flaveen said. 'Seen coming out of the sword room holding something under his jacket.'

'I see. And whoever it was who saw him swore you to secrecy about the business?'

‘Yes.’

‘They caught a glimpse of the sword itself, did they?’

‘Yes, they did, as a matter of fact.’

‘I see. So that seems to prove it doesn’t it?’

‘Well, aren’t you convinced?’

‘I would like to know how the alarm device was beaten.’

‘Well, I can’t tell you that. But Jim’s got brains, anyone can see that. And he’s practical too. He’s not one of the ones who’s all cleverness until it comes to doing something.’

‘No, I think I agree with your description. Mr Henderson is a man of intelligence and action. Perhaps one day he will tell us how they combined to defeat the alarm.’

‘Now listen,’ said Flaveen. ‘Don’t go asking him or anything, You’re going to get your sword back, I’ve told you that. And you know who took it. But I’ve got one or two things to do before the whole thing’s finished, so you just sit tight. You owe me that.’

‘Mr Henderson will expect me to see him,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I am seeing everybody in turn. He is the last one.’

Flaveen considered.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. But you’re right. If you don’t see him now he’ll suspect you know he took the sword. And I don’t want him to suspect anything for a bit. But you must promise you won’t tell him what I’ve told you.’

‘I won’t tell him what you’ve told me,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘You do not have to worry about that.’

Flaveen bounced up.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘that’s about the lot then. I liked our little chat. I didn’t expect to, I must say. But it was very nice really.’

‘I’m glad you enjoyed it,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The sword may not always cause you so little trouble.’

Chapter 10

Tap, tap, tap. Along the corridors scurrying feet.

Coming round a corner the two German girls met.

'I am looking for Mr Henderson,' said the dark one.

'Oh, I am looking for Mr Henderson too. Everybody is looking for Mr Henderson.'

A toss of the flaxen plaits.

'Mr Utamaro was very - very *entschieden*,' said the dark one.

Expression unrelievedly serious. A sense of mission.

'*Entschieden* is "peremptory",' said the blonde.

'Oh, such a word. How did you know it?'

'Just yesterday I read it in a novel. I looked it up this morning.'

'You are always so lucky.'

'No, I am not lucky. I thought when Mr Utamaro asked me to find Mr Henderson I would at least find Mr Gerry. But I had no luck. All I have found is Miss Mills. I haven't even found Mr Henderson.'

'I too have found Miss Mills, but not Mr Henderson. Mr Henderson is much more correct than Mr Gerry.'

Expression pious.

'Oh yes, Mr Henderson is correct, so correct all the time. He walks past you and you might as well be a statue. Very correct. But he doesn't think Miss Flaveen Mills is a statue. *Der Heuchler*.'

'Ah, you should say "hypocrite".'

'No, thank you. The English doesn't let you put any feeling into the word. *Der Heuchler*. That is what I mean.'

*

Jim Henderson knocked at the door of Mr Utamaro's room.

'Come in.'

Mr Utamaro was sitting on the scratched old kitchen chair facing the door. The other chair awaiting an occupant stood opposite him.

Jim looked round the room. Incuriously. The utilitarian man and the utilitarian place.

'I hear you wanted to see me,' he said.

'Please sit down.'

Jim sat on the second chair without looking at it. A surface of the right height made use of.

'Well?' he said.

'Are you going to tell me what the sound of one hand clapping is?' said Mr Utamaro.

'Sure, I heard you wanted me urgently,' Jim said. 'I have to get away about five and twenty after twelve.'

'And what is the time now?' said Mr Utamaro. 'I don't carry a watch, you know.'

'Neither do I,' said Jim. 'Never been able to pay for one. I rely on public clocks. It just struck twelve before I came in.'

'So we have twenty minutes or more, a long time.'

'Not so long as all that.'

The clipped words.

'Yes, a very short time.'

'All right,' said Jim, 'go ahead with that stuff, if you must. But don't forget I've read my Kant and your man Bergson. If you really want an answer to your one hand clapping I can give it you.'

'I wonder,' said Mr Utamaro.

‘Matter of simple symbolism,’ said Jim. ‘One hand clapping represents the universe, the unconditioned, if you like. The whole which has nothing to oppose it.’

Mr Utamaro shook his head.

‘Not a matter of symbolism,’ he said. ‘Zen is not metaphysics.’

‘If it’s not that, it’s nonsense,’ said Jim.

‘Exactly, Zen is non-sense.’

Jim’s look of baffled fury.

‘And yet it has a social application,’ he said. ‘A philosophy – call it that anyway – which teaches people to ignore conventions could be a very useful tool in the right hands.’

‘You have already expressed your admiration of the poet Yuan-Wu,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘That about a real man taking the farmer’s ox,’ Jim said. ‘It was an expression of what I mean.’

‘And so you stole the sword?’

‘I what?’

Outrage.

Jim jumped up and looked down at Mr Utamaro.

‘Listen to me,’ he said. ‘I never stole a penny piece in my life. I’ve had need to often enough. I’ve gone hungry for want of a penny to buy a cake at school. But I happen to have a certain sense of personal integrity. I’m not a thief. Just that.’

He whirled round, snatched at the door and marched out leaving it open behind him.

Mr Utamaro sat without moving. Minutes passed. He saw Alasdair Stuart hurry past and heard his heavy steps going up the stairs to the bedrooms. Almost running. When the sound of a door slamming came faintly down the corridor Mr Utamaro walked quietly out of his room and went down the main stairway into the hall.

He stopped and looked at the grandfather clock. Its hands pointed to 12.28. As he looked at it there came the whirr of the striking mechanism. Mr Utamaro counted the strokes. One, two, three, four, five, six.

When he turned round he found Miss Rohan standing beside him.

He grinned at her.

Miss Olive Rohan. Iron grey hair militarily in place. Unvarying tweed suit neatly pressed. Shoes thoroughly polished with a trace of wet darkening the toes.

'Is it six o'clock?' said Mr Utamaro. 'Or is it nearly half past twelve?'

Miss Rohan looked at her watch.

'It is one minute to half past twelve,' she said. 'My watch is old, but very good. It never loses a minute.'

'But what time would it have been if you had not had your watch?' said Mr Utamaro.

'One minute to half past twelve,' Miss Rohan said.

Easily answered.

'Perhaps you are right,' said Mr Utamaro.

'There are times when I do not know what I should do if it weren't for the simple certainties of life,' Miss Rohan said. 'Do you know what part of the newspaper gives me most pleasure?'

'I do not often read the papers,' said Mr Utamaro.

'I sometimes think of giving it up,' Miss Rohan said. 'Almost everything one reads in it is disagreeable. But there is still this one item that sustains me.'

'And that is?'

'The date at the top of the front page.'

She took a short step towards him and spoke on a lower note.

'I was sitting in the garden just now,' she said, 'reading the paper as a matter of fact, and do you know what

happened?’

‘Something that surprised you.’

Mr Utamaro looked at her. His tangled eyebrows knitted in a glance of fierce penetration.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘something that surprised me. I shall never get used to such behaviour. It oughtn’t to exist.’

‘It does exist.’

‘But, only imagine, that girl, Miss Mills, Flaveen. She was leaning out of a window on the second floor, and –’

She paused. And when she went on made an effort to control the vehemence.

‘– and she blew one of those nasty tweeter things at me, the green one Mr Manvers gave her last night.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Oh, I know, I oughtn’t to object. You will tell me it was only youthful high spirits. But I do object. I hate it. Say what you like, it is nasty and vulgar, and there it is.’

‘She has different manners from you,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘But you know from your own experience she has a great deal of kindness in her make-up.’

‘Oh, yes, I know that. And don’t think I am trying to deny it. She is a kind, and even a simple-hearted, girl underneath. I grant you that. I suppose you will say that for that reason I ought to like her. But I don’t. And I can’t bring myself to. Her whole manner – everything she says and does – is alien to me. We were brought up poles apart. And whatever happens, poles apart we remain.’

And suddenly Gerry was leaning over the banisters above them.

‘Caught you in the corner,’ he said.

Miss Rohan said nothing. A toss of her head and quick steps past Gerry up the stairs and away.

‘Oh, oh,’ said Gerry. ‘In the doghouse again.’

He ran down the last few steps of the stairs, swung round the newel post and confronted Mr Utamaro.

‘I can’t help it,’ he said. ‘I’ve only got to see her, and I feel like making a raspberry. And she always reacts so beautifully. That’s what gets me.’

He tossed his head and took six or seven steps back up the stairs in a parody of Miss Rohan’s walk.

Then he turned and came down to Mr Utamaro.

‘Is that clock right by any chance?’ he said.

‘The hands point to the correct time,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘But it doesn’t matter.’

Gerry shook his head sadly.

‘It may not matter to you, old cock, but time is vital to us businessmen. Never lose a minute. That’s my motto.’

‘When you can’t think of anything else to say,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘you ask what the time is. Everybody does it. But you must learn not to be afraid of having nothing to say. There is very little that has to be said.’

Gerry’s face took on an expression of deep seriousness.

‘You’re perfectly right,’ he said. ‘That’s what is wrong with me. Idle chatter. I mean to ask you one thing, and I ask you something else. Sheer frivolity. Utterly disgusting. I didn’t want to know the time at all. I wanted to know if you had seen my wife. That’s no lady, that’s my wife.’

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘I have not seen her. Did you want her urgently? I was just going to take a walk round the gardens. Major Francis told me it was important to do what he called “beating the bounds” once a day. I will look out for your wife as I do it.’

‘Don’t bother, don’t put yourself out, don’t go to any trouble just for unworthy me,’ said Gerry. ‘I just wondered if you happened to know where she was. Felt like a nice old heart to heart. Which way were you going?’

‘I will go up to the far end of the grounds first, if you like,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘To that spinney you can see from the big lawn. The garden stretches as far as that. Then if you go down the drive towards the village we are bound to see her if she is in the grounds.’

‘Man the pumps,’ said Gerry. ‘All hands to the fo’c’sle. Belay there. And if you do find her, don’t try to engage her in frivolous conversation. I know you, that’s just the sort of thing you would do. I have a feeling she’s in a bit of a tigerish mood. So if you find your head bitten off, don’t be surprised.’

‘I will go then,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The sun is out. It will be pleasant.’

They walked together to the wide front door. Gerry set off down the drive and Mr Utamaro went round the corner of the house to the cedar lawn. As he got to the corner he turned and called back to Gerry.

‘Here is something to think about,’ he shouted. ‘What is the smell of your trick flower?’

Gerry had looked round when he heard Mr Utamaro’s voice. Now he put his hand to the empty buttonhole in his lapel.

‘What did you say?’ he called back.

‘What is the smell of a paper flower?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I don’t know,’ said Gerry. ‘It broke and I threw it away.’

‘That is a good answer,’ shouted Mr Utamaro.

He turned on his heel and set off across the lawn.

The sky was a soft light blue and the clouds lolloping across it were small and puffy and entirely white. At the far side of the lawn from the house there was a pergola in a moderate state of repair. Mr Utamaro went through it and into the kitchen garden. The big beds were mostly empty; the brown earth, recently turned by a cultivating machine, was weed free. One large patch still supported a number of cabbages battered by the length of the winter. Where one of

them had been cut shoots of new green caught the sunlight. A straight path made of cinders went through the vegetable garden from end to end. Mr Utamaro walked along it with powerful strides. At the end he came to a thick beech hedge still keeping its crisp bronze leaves. Mr Utamaro opened the gate at the end of the cinder path and stepped into a big orchard. It consisted mostly of apple, pear and plum trees. Only the pears were showing any sign of blossom, but a single row of cherries along one border of the orchard was in full bloom, dazzlingly white, harder in tone than the clouds in the soft blue sky but as dense in mass.

For one minute Mr Utamaro stood looking at them. Then he briskly resumed his walk.

The orchard was bounded on the far side by a yew hedge, tall, massively dark green, and thick. The path went through an arch in it. When Mr Utamaro had passed this he found himself in a piece of rough pasture which had been left untended at least all the previous summer. The grass had long since dried to desiccated brown stalks and had been soaked by a winter's rain and battered to a tangle by the wind. The path could scarcely be made out. Mr Utamaro picked his way carefully along it, stepping over giant thistles blown down across the faint track and striding over patches of swampy puddles.

After about a hundred yards the pasture began to merge into the spinney which could be seen from the lawn under the cedar of Lebanon. This consisted of scrubby birch trees leading up to a clump of seven pines.

Mr Utamaro followed the path right into the spinney. Under the pines he saw an old summer house in the rustic style. The bark was peeling from the wood and a sharp smell of rotting came to his nostrils.

Through a gap where one of the planks was missing he saw a patch of vivid orange.

He stopped walking and stood still.

‘Mrs Manvers,’ he called. ‘Mrs Manvers, your husband was looking for you.’

The orange stuff of Honor’s blouse moved, but she said nothing.

Mr Utamaro went forward and entered the summer house. Honor was sitting on a small bench that ran across the back of the hut. Mr Utamaro bowed and sat down beside her.

‘I left your husband about ten minutes ago,’ he said. ‘He asked me if I had seen you and, as he appeared a little anxious to find you, I said I would look for you as I walked through the grounds. Major Francis asked me to inspect them every day, but yesterday I forgot.’

Honor looked at him.

‘Gerry seemed anxious to find me?’ she said.

‘Yes, I thought so.’

Honor laughed.

A bark.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s certainly a change for him to be wanting me. It’s generally only when he needs money that he’s anxious to see me. I earn a good deal more than him. I forget whether I told you that.’

‘You did,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Yes, I expect I did. I believe in telling people the truth about us. I believe in telling the truth, you know.’

‘I have heard you say so.’

‘I do.’

She took hold of his arm. Thin fingers gripping tight.

‘That’s my creed, you know,’ she said. ‘Telling the truth. Telling my truth, and everybody’s else’s. Bringing things to light. That’s what I believe in. That’s what keeps me going.’

She laughed again. A longer laugh.

‘Do you think that’s a good enough creed?’ she said.

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘No, I didn’t think you would.’

'No creed is a good enough creed. When we start living to a creed we are forcing our minds into a strait-jacket.'

'But as creeds go,' said Honor, 'mine has got a bit to be said for it, hasn't it?'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro. 'One is as bad as another.'

'So it doesn't matter if I abandon my creed,' said Honor.

'You must abandon it.'

'And it doesn't matter if I'm left without a reason for living?'

'To be without a reason for living is the only reason for living.'

'So helpful,' Honor said.

A jet of venom.

'It is only words,' said Mr Utamaro. 'They cannot be helpful, but sometimes one tries them.'

Honor sat without speaking. From time to time she glanced at Mr Utamaro. He sat impassively, absolutely motionless. But active. Thought concentrated by a burning glass.

After eight minutes Gerry's voice could be heard shouting.

'Mr Utamaro. Mr Utamaro.'

Getting nearer.

'Mr Utamaro. Utey. Utey.'

Mr Utamaro said nothing.

Honor stirred, half got up to go, slumped back again.

'Bloody countryside,' came Gerry's voice quite close to them.

'Manvers, your wife is here,' said Mr Utamaro.

Gerry yelped.

'For heaven's sake,' he said, 'you don't want to go doing that. I've got nerves.'

He came round the summer house and stood in the doorway. He looked at Honor.

'You two were very quiet,' he said.' Spot of dodgy canoodling, or what?'

'Gerry, you're disgusting,' said Honor.

'Here,' said Gerry, 'I want to talk to you. Come on.'

Honor looked surprised.

'You want to talk to me?' she said. 'What about?'

'Family matters,' said Gerry.

A touch of insolence.

'Then I will leave you,' said Mr Utamaro.

'I must apologize for this boor,' Honor said.

Mr Utamaro brushing through the undergrowth of the spinney, tracing the path through the tangled grass of the pasture. Walking without haste but with speed through the orchard and the kitchen garden.

The garden overshadowed now by a fat black cloud. No sun. The freshness of the new green shoots lost in the dimmer light. Heavy raindrops striking the already moist earth of the vegetable beds, refilling the cups of the old cabbage leaves. A drop struck Mr Utamaro on his shaven head near the left ear. He walked on.

A puff of breeze stirred the brittle leaves of the beech hedge. The rain holding off. And a sudden downpour.

The cloud bucket sharply reversed.

The turned earth battered into mud, the wet grass flattened into the soft ground, the cherry blossom knocked from the branches.

Mr Utamaro ran back and took shelter in the arch of the high yew hedge, but before he got there his cotton kimono was soaked.

In two minutes the shower was over. The fat black cloud moved away. The smell of damp vegetation.

Mr Utamaro continued his patrol of the grounds with his kimono gently steaming. In northern Norway Major Francis tramped over some snow.

*

‘Well,’ said Miss Rohan, ‘we seem to be a reduced party.’

Sitting in the common room after lunch. Mr Utamaro, his feet still generously muddy from his walk, the two tufts of black hair on either side of his head only just bristling up after their wetting and his kimono still dull with dampness, Alasdair Stuart, Jim Henderson, the Rev. Cyprian Applecheek. Miss Rohan, neat hair unvarying, neat suit, bright shoes which had lost the traces of wet at the toes – pouring instant coffee.

Mr Applecheek after a pause replied to her.

‘I would have welcomed the absence of the others at luncheon,’ he said, ‘only the food did not merit a second helping.’

Another silence.

Single sentences dropping into the afternoon torpor. Acorns from an oak.

‘Here comes someone, anyhow,’ said Alasdair. ‘Bit slack if you ask me, missing a meal and not saying a word.’

The sound of footsteps on the bare boards of the corridor outside. Magnified, echoing.

The door opened and Honor came in.

‘Hello, everybody,’ she said. ‘I wondered where you all were. I’m back in the civilized world now. Sorry I skipped lunch. Suddenly I felt I had to get away for a quiet think.’

She smiled at Mr Utamaro.

‘This Zen must be getting me worried,’ she said.

The door opened again and Gerry came in.

‘See,’ he said, ‘I brought back the wandering sheep. She had to file a story. We went down to the village.’

Nobody spoke. A disparity noticed.

‘Perhaps the efficacy of Zen has been a little overrated,’ Mr Applecheek said.

A gleam in his eyes.

‘Have I said something wrong?’ said Gerry,

‘Not necessarily,’ Mr Applecheek replied. ‘It may have been your good wife. She seemed to imply that she had left us for less mundane purposes, less mundane indeed.’

‘She’s a snob, you know,’ said Gerry. ‘Doesn’t like it to be thought she works for a living. Likes to give out an air of having a husband to support her.’

Smooth. Easy.

‘But the hard fact is she had to get on to her editor to let him know what to expect about this balloon story. I think he thought she wouldn’t do it.’

‘And will you do it, Mrs Manvers?’ asked Alasdair.

‘I certainly told the editor I would just now,’ Honor said.

Jim Henderson slammed his book shut.

‘You didn’t see Flaveen?’ he said.

‘Flaveen, no,’ said Gerry. ‘Where is she?’

‘That’s what I’ve been wondering,’ Jim said. ‘She didn’t come in for lunch.’

‘There could be many reasons for that,’ said Miss Rohan.

And a silence.

‘I can’t think of that many,’ said Jim.

He walked quickly across to the door and out

Nobody spoke.

An inexplicable uneasiness.

‘I expect she has a headache,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘I must try to remember that she missed a meal,’ Mr Utamaro said.’ I think Major Francis wanted me to make a note of any meals that were not eaten. He left me a typed sheet of instructions and I seem to remember that that was one of them.’

A pause.

‘You’ve lost your instructions?’ said Mr Applecheek.

‘I do not recall seeing them since Major Francis left,’ Mr Utamaro said.

A longer pause.

'Mr Henderson seems to be making a very thorough search,' said Miss Rohan.' He seemed to be a little...'

She abandoned the remark.

'Did you say Major Francis was in Norway?' Alasdair said.

'There must be a lot to do on the administrative side,' Miss Rohan said.

Each glancing at the other, ready to stop speaking but carrying on.

Unwillingness to create a silence.

'I am not a born admin—' Mr Utamaro began.

The sound of heavy steps running along the corridor towards them.

They all sat listening.

Miss Rohan stood up.

The door was pushed open.

Jim Henderson.

A blank face.

'Flaveen,' he said. 'Flaveen.'

The two words forced out.

Mr Utamaro got up and moved across the room to him. Swiftly, silently.

Miss Rohan stood stock still. The others looked up at him. Waiting to hear something of importance. Something grave.

Mr Utamaro touched Jim lightly on the elbow.

'I've found Flaveen,' Jim said. 'She's dead.'

Chapter 11

'Dead?' said Miss Rohan.

A touch of sharpness.

'What do you mean, dead? Has she been ill? Are you sure? Where is she?'

She glanced at her watch, and stood waiting for an answer.

Jim wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket and for a moment let the thick cloth blot out the light from his eyes.

'She wasn't ill,' he said. 'You don't understand.'

He swayed slightly backwards and forwards.

Mr Utamaro guided him deftly to a chair. He leant over him for an instant and then said:

'Now, tell me where she is. We don't need to know any more.'

Jim looked up at him. Totally pale. Eyes slowly blinking.

'In the meditation hall,' he said.

A whisper.

'All right,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Now, Miss Rohan, will you stay here and look after Mr Henderson? And Mr Stuart will you come with me?'

'You're sure you don't want me?' said Miss Rohan.

'I will come for you if it is necessary,' Mr Utamaro said.

Without another word he left the room. Alasdair followed. Along the corridor, up the stairs, along the top corridor. At uniform speed.

At the double doors of the meditation hall Mr Utamaro paused until Alasdair had caught up with him. Then with a single motion he pushed both doors open.

Flaveen was dead.

And there was no question of illness.

She lay sprawled on the floor about three yards from the door. The Muramasa wakizashi had been driven into her body up to the hilt. A little blood stained her white blouse.

Alasdair's face slowly drained of its colour. Then he said:

'I told you so. I warned you. I knew it was dangerous. And now look what's happened. She's dead. She's dead. She's been killed. Murdered. I told you something would happen. I told you. I told you.'

'Mr Stuart,' said Mr Utamaro.

The level voice.

'Mr Stuart, I want you to telephone for the police. You know where the warden's office is?'

'Just past the common room, that door on the right,' said Alasdair.

'Yes. Go along there. The room is unlocked and the telephone is on the desk. Tell the police one of the students on the course has been killed. You are not to say any more. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Alasdair.

A murmur.

'All right, then. Go.'

Alasdair went. Uneven steps along the corridor, going down the stairs in a series of rushes. Mr Utamaro walked slowly round the meditation hall looking from side to side.

In the big empty room no place of concealment. At the far end Mr Utamaro stood on tiptoe to get the best possible view of the little gallery above the double doors.

When he had satisfied himself that this too was deserted he left the room, carefully closing the doors behind him.

Then he sat down on the floor outside and waited.

*

‘But what will my parents say?’

Tears in the dark girl’s eyes.

‘That is easy. They will say you are to come home at once.’

A toss of the flaxen plaits.

‘But if I go home, how can I perfect my English?’

A wail.

‘If you go home you won’t perfect your English. You won’t stand a chance in your exam. You are already behind in your work-programme.’

‘I know. I know. Oh, what am I to do?’

‘You should do what I am going to do.’

A prim little complacent smile.

‘What is that? Have you thought of a way of persuading your parents that in England murder is not very important?’

‘They already believe that it is a commonplace event and that young girls are the most usual victims. That would not help.’

‘But what are you going to do?’

‘It is very simple. I am not going to tell them about the murder.’

Bright blue eyes widely innocent under the blonde hair.

*

‘I’m Detective Superintendent Padbourne.’

A tubby man. Sparse gingerish hair, a uniformly pink complexion, small eyes, slight double chin, meticulously shaved. Wearing a dull green Harris tweed sports jacket, a striped shirt with a check cotton tie, and grey flannels. Brown shoes brightly polished.

He stood with his back to the empty fireplace in the common room, short legs apart, shoulders against the

mantelshelf. Looking at them sitting uncomfortably round him with a detective sergeant inconspicuously behind them. Eyes missing nothing.

Detective Superintendent Padbourne. A shrewd little porker.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I dare say you all know by now: Miss Mills has been murdered. There can be little doubt about that, though we haven’t had the result of the post-mortem yet. But it’s almost certain that no accident could have put that sword into her as deeply as it was, and it’s at such an angle that it’s equally unlikely that she could have done it herself.’

‘And this wretched lunatic, superintendent,’ said Mr Applecheek, ‘have you found him? No doubt a poor demented creature of that sort is to blame – otherwise it might be one of us.’

Superintendent Padbourne looked at him steadily. The skin puckering in concentration at the corners of his little pig eyes.

‘That’s what we have to face, if I take your point correctly,’ he said. ‘Miss Mills was killed with a Japanese sword, which, as I understand it, was – er abstracted from the room where it was kept. That seems to narrow the possibilities. It’s unlikely that a stranger both stole the sword and killed with it. Of course I’m not ignoring the chance that the weapon was found after it had been stolen by this wandering madman you’re so keen on, sir.’

He nodded briefly in Mr Applecheek’s direction.

‘But it’s only fair to tell you that to the best of our knowledge there are no homicidal maniacs at large.’

‘But there must be,’ said Miss Rohan.

A prayer.

‘There may be, madam, but it’s unlikely at the least,’ said the superintendent.

Matter-of-fact.

‘So,’ he went on, ‘I want to know all about this sword, and as soon as possible. First, let me ask straight out. Which of you took it?’

Flicking, darting to and fro, not a movement missed, the two piggy eyes.

Everybody watching him, holding themselves still. Avoiding any accusation.

Superintendent Padbourne said nothing. The silence allowed to grow.

And nerves to stretch.

The two restless pig eyes never stopping in their play over the faces, the hands, the feet of the people sitting round.

At last the superintendent said:

‘No? Well, I shall be asking you each that same question individually. That and a lot of others. Perhaps you may care to be more forthcoming in private.’

‘Superintendent,’ said Mr Utamaro.

The calm syllables.

‘Superintendent, there is one thing I think I ought to make clear now. Something which I had allowed to remain obscure hitherto.’

‘Yes?’ said the superintendent.

Still the restless eyes wandering.

‘The sword.’

‘Yes?’

‘The riddle of its disappearance from the thief-proof cabinet can easily be explained.’

‘I had a quick look at the cabinet,’ the superintendent said. ‘It’s a type I’m familiar with. You’re wrong in calling it thief-proof, you know. There are men about, not many but a few, who could open it. You had no real grounds to assume it was an inside job.’

‘I did have, superintendent,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘You see, the sword was not in the cabinet when it was stolen. Major Francis, the warden here, you know – he is on holiday – insisted on having the cabinet installed. But it seemed to me that its presence was inviting the attention of people who would have mastered its secret. So every evening I quietly removed the sword and hid it. I’m afraid Major Francis will not approve.’

‘The only thing wrong with your line of reasoning, sir, if I may say so,’ said the superintendent, ‘is that when anything is stolen from that particular type of cabinet we know one of three people stole it.’

‘Certainly I have been proved wrong,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The sword was stolen. Stolen by somebody here who must have seen me move it. And its disappearance has had terrible consequences.’

‘That is as may be,’ said the superintendent. ‘It depends a good deal on where exactly you hid the weapon when you took it from the showcase.’

‘It was in my room,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘I have a little box, like most Zen monks, in which I keep my few personal possessions. The sword just fitted into it. It was there.’

‘I shall have to see the box of course,’ Superintendent Padbourne said. ‘But tell me, what is its general appearance? Is it heavily ornamented or plain? Is it equipped with a lock?’

‘It is a quite plain lacquered box,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘And of course it has no lock.’

‘Not the sort of thing to attract the casual prowler, then?’ said the superintendent.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘But it must have been,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘That is the obvious explanation. This is a big house, anybody could wander into it quite easily, and when they saw this exotic

box of Mr Utamaro's what could be more natural than to look into it and take the sword?'

'You've seen the box, madam?' said the superintendent.

A ripple of impatience.

'No, no, I haven't seen it.'

'Have you been into this room? Or seen into it through the open door?'

'Oh, yes, of course, I have been into the room,' Miss Rohan said. 'Mr Utamaro conducted his sanzen there.'

'And the box was in full view,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Mr Utamaro,' said the superintendent, 'when you transferred the sword from the cabinet to your room, did you take any special precautions to avoid observation?'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro. 'There was, as far as I knew, no one about at that time. But I might have been observed walking along the corridor. It is a little distance.'

'You didn't conceal the sword as you walked?'

'I held it with the blade running along my arm,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It would not have been particularly conspicuous, but it could have been seen.'

'And you told nobody about the transfer?'

'Nobody.'

'At what time did it take place?'

'It was shortly after tea,' Mr Utamaro said. 'That would be about 6 p.m., I suppose.'

'And you discovered the theft when?'

'Just before nine o'clock. I was to have made some announcements at nine, in accordance with Major Francis's custom, and I went to my box to fetch a slip of paper with notes on it that Major Francis had given me. It was then I found the sword was missing.'

'What was happening during the evening?' said the superintendent. 'What happened immediately after the tea meal?'

'Most people went to their rooms, I think,' Mr Utamaro said. 'They were anxious to tidy themselves up.'

'And the rooms are on the second floor?'

'They are. All except mine.'

'So it looks as if anybody could have seen you move the sword. Can you pinpoint the time you moved it more accurately?'

'No, superintendent, I carry no watch. And I am not accustomed to thinking what particular time it is at any particular moment.'

'Part of the religious habit, I dare say,' said the superintendent.

A hint of scorn. A habit - there was no doubt - to be deplored.

'And how was the rest of the evening spent?' he asked.

'There was no programme in particular. We talked together, we had dinner, and there was an informal sort of party.'

'You didn't all stay together for that?'

'No, I think I am right in saying people wandered out every now and again for various reasons.'

'Right,' said the superintendent.

He stepped forward from the fireplace.

'I can see no reason to change my views as a result of this conversation,' he said. 'Miss Mills was almost certainly murdered, and the chances that it was by an intruder are slight. I shall be wanting to see you one by one during the rest of the day. There is a constable on duty at each door of the house. They have orders not to let anybody past them.'

He stumped out, followed by his silent sergeant.

'Insufferable little man,' said Alasdair.

He spoke loudly. A voice intended to penetrate the door. But only just.

'He's doing his duty,' Jim said.

Alasdair glared at him.

'I think there is a good deal to be said for your view, Mr Stuart,' said Miss Rohan. 'He struck me as unnecessarily brusque.'

'Of course he was,' said Alasdair.

He stood up and went over to Miss Rohan, pulling a small tin box from his pocket.

'Would you care for one of these?' he said. 'Only peppermints, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, thank you,' Miss Rohan said.

She took one of the tablets and put it in her mouth.

'They're very strong,' she said.

'Anyone else care for one?' said Alasdair.

He passed the box round. When he got to Jim he ostentatiously snapped the lid of the box shut. Then he said:

'No doubt we could all do with something a little stronger than a peppermint. But that doesn't seem to be practical at the moment'

He walked across to the fireplace and took the same attitude as Superintendent Padbourne had done.

'I think we ought to discuss the situation,' he said.

'There's nothing to discuss,' Jim said. 'For some reason or other one of us killed that poor kid. Let's hope the superintendent isn't long finding who it was. I don't think he will be.'

'And what makes you say that,' said Alasdair.

'He strikes me as pretty efficient,' Jim said.

'Does he?' said Alasdair. 'Mrs Manvers, you've probably had more experience of this sort of thing than any of us, would you say that that little man was efficient?'

'I really don't know,' said Honor.

Abstracted. Distant.

'Oy, oy,' said Gerry. 'Making out my wife hobnobs with the police. You be careful. That could be libel.'

'Slander,' said Honor.

'All the same thing,' Gerry said.

'But seriously, Mrs Manvers,' said Alasdair. 'Hasn't your journalistic experience brought you into contact with the top-notchers in the police, the Scotland Yard men? Aren't they rather different from our friend?'

'I've met one or two,' Honor said.

Rousing herself.

'To tell you the truth I wasn't very greatly impressed with them. I did a series on the crime wave. "What's wrong with Scotland Yard?" I found quite a bit of material. The trouble is they're completely unimaginative. They've attempted to reduce all forms of crime to stereotyped situations that can all be dealt with in the same way, according to the same formula. They try to reduce the human mind to a series of formulas. And I don't suppose this chap will be any better. He probably won't know quite as many formulas. I don't know. Anyhow, take it or leave it, that was my story at the time.'

'And she's sticking to it,' said Gerry.

'Yes,' said Honor, 'my professional reputation depends on it. Honor Brentt has exposed the police force. They'd better stay exposed.'

'I don't think all that was true of the older type of officer,' Miss Rohan said. 'But you may well be right about the present product. If you can't get people who know about things, you have to try and find a system for them to learn. And of course it can't work. It's the same all over.'

'Aren't you forgetting something?' said Jim Henderson.

The harsh voice from between the clenched teeth.

'Aren't you forgetting that someone has been killed?'

He looked round at them. A scowl.

'Well, of course one isn't forgetting,' said Mr Applecheek. 'It is indeed a sign of how acutely we are remembering that

we are attempting to steer the conversation into other waters.'

'All the same,' said Alasdair, 'there's something to be said for Henderson's view. I've certainly been having a quiet think about the situation, and I don't see any point in waiting to see if that complacent little policeman begins to find out the truth. I want to know sooner than he's likely to be able to tell me. I don't want to hobnob with a murderer longer than I have to.'

'That wasn't exactly what I meant,' said Jim.

'Wasn't it? I'm not surprised to find we differ. But I venture to think that what I've just been suggesting is something we ought to consider before everything else. Do we know who killed Flaveen?'

Gerry Manvers got up and leant against the mantelshelf beside Alasdair. A sufficient parody.

'You want to watch out,' he said. 'This is where we begin the third degree stuff.'

'Don't be a fool, man,' Alasdair said. 'I'm not saying I know, or anything like that. What I am suggesting is that between us we have all the facts necessary to show who stole the sword. We could find out in a few minutes. And that's just what I propose to do.'

Gerry looked at him and strolled back to his chair.

'Go ahead, if you're so clever,' he said.

'I'm not all sure that you should,' said Miss Rohan,

An obstacle interposed.

'I can't see why not,' said Alasdair.

'Because such things should be left to the police,' Miss Rohan said. 'The superintendent is to interview us each quite soon. He will find out whatever facts we know. We should leave it to him.'

'And hang about perhaps all the rest of the day while he pieces his facts together,' said Alasdair. 'No thank you. We

can find out in five minutes ourselves.'

'And I don't think we ought to,' Miss Rohan said.

The others looked away from her. Embarrassing obstinacy.

Alasdair, shoulders square against the mantelshef, did not look away.

'Tell me,' he said, 'just why you are so anxious for this conversation not to take place?'

'Because the result is bound to be unpleasant,' Miss Rohan said.

A quaver of unsuppressed emotion.

'Why can't you leave things alone?' she said. 'Why go asking for unpleasantness? Do you never think of the consequences of anything you do? If you find out who took the sword, what happens next? Have you thought of that? Are you ready to frog-march the culprit in to the superintendent? Or what do you intend to do?'

'I've no doubt the person in question, whoever it proves to be, will act sensibly,' said Alasdair.

Gerry laughed.

'Very well then, we'll see,' said Alasdair.

Cheeks flushing heavy red.

'There's one quite simple fact that appears to have escaped our policeman friend,' he said. 'It's true enough that at the time Mr Utamaro moved the sword we were all more or less on our own and that anybody could have seen what had happened to it. But later on that evening we were all together for most of the time. People did go out every now and again but not for long and often not alone. And that's when the sword must have been stolen: when the thief could be fairly certain Mr Utamaro was occupied. So all we have to do is to account for our absences during dinner and the party afterwards.'

'Then suppose you account for yours,' said Gerry.

From the depths of his utilitarian armchair.

‘Very well, I will. I did leave the party, if you can call it a party, for a few moments. To tell you the truth I got extremely bored. I went up to my room and read. I was there about half an hour and came down in time to hear Mr Utamaro say the sword had been stolen.’

‘So we’ve solved the mystery in one,’ Gerry said. ‘You did the dirty deed, old boy. It’s obvious.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Alasdair said. ‘You might remember this is a matter of life and death.’

‘And so might you,’ Jim said. ‘You might remember that a human being has died. This isn’t the time for a display of officer-like qualities. You’d do better to shut up.’

‘Would I indeed?’ said Alasdair. ‘Do better to shut up? And not ask questions which might make it difficult for people, some people, I suppose.’

‘We’ve had enough of the personality cult,’ said Jim.

‘And enough questions too, I suppose. We don’t want to get on to the stage of asking why it took you more than half an hour to wash some sugar out of your hair, I suppose. Come on now, I can remember the sequence of events quite clearly. You went out saying you wanted a wash. I thought that was as good a time as any to go too. I went up to my room and stayed there reading for a good half hour. And when I came back you were still out of the room. It doesn’t take half an hour and more to have a wash. Just what were you doing?’

He moved across the room and stood looking down at Jim.

Jim said nothing.

‘Well?’ said Alasdair.

Aggression.

Jim pushed back his chair and stood up.

‘I don’t intend to tell you,’ he said. ‘I don’t intend to tell anyone.’

'I'd advise you to tell the police, Mr Henderson,' said Alasdair.

'I've no more intention of telling them than I have of telling you,' Jim said. 'Good night.'

Chapter 12

'I Think I'd better have a word with Superintendent Padbourne,' Alasdair said.

'That will not be necessary.'

Mr Utamaro spoke without moving from the chair where he had sat ever since his disclosure of how the sword had disappeared.

Alasdair, who had been walking towards the door, stopped.

'It's - It's all very well,' he said, 'but the chap's practically confessed to stealing the sword and the police ought to be told.'

'There is no need,' said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair turned towards the door again, hesitated, and then looked straight at Mr Utamaro.

'I scarcely think you are in a position to say that,' he said. 'May I remind you that when I wanted the theft of the sword reported to the proper authorities you were the one who consistently opposed me.'

'One does not have to be "in a position" to say things,' Mr Utamaro said, 'one says them or one does not.'

Alasdair frowned.

'And what's more,' he said, 'I think you owe us some sort of an explanation. You let us all go on believing the sword had been stolen from the showcase when you knew perfectly well it had been taken from your room. I don't consider that particularly ethical.'

'There are no ethics in Zen,' said Mr Utamaro. 'There is no truth and no lies. You believed the sword had been stolen

from the showcase. Where had it been stolen from?’

‘To be perfectly frank,’ said Alasdair, ‘I think the time for that sort of remark has long gone by.’

Mr Utamaro grinned up at him.

‘Oh, Mr Stuart,’ he said, ‘and you were in some ways my most promising pupil.’

‘That is as may be,’ Alasdair said.

Less strident.

‘But, look here,’ he went on, ‘there’s a time and a place for everything. Just as soon as this unpleasant business has been cleared up we can get back to Zen. And I for one shall be de-lighted.’

Mr Utamaro grinned again.

‘And in any case,’ he said, ‘if I had not let you believe the sword had been taken from the thief-proof cabinet, how could I have caught you out?’

‘I think you might have let me into the secret,’ Honor said. ‘Though you were perfectly right to try it.’

‘All this doesn’t alter the fact that our friend Henderson has just been proved to be the thief,’ said Alasdair. ‘And, if you ask me, that means the murderer. I told you the sword had been stolen as a weapon.’

‘Mr Henderson has declared his intention of not telling the police what he was doing when he was away from the dining room last night,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘And that is a different thing from stealing the sword. Declaring his intention not to tell the police is even a different thing from not telling them.’

‘You think he will tell them after all, then?’ said Alasdair.

‘No, I don’t,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘But you can be sure that they will ask him. That is all we need to know. He will not be allowed to leave until they have asked. And now I feel hungry: it is dinner time.’

'But when my parents find out I have been lying,' said the dark girl, 'what will they say?'

The blonde girl busily piled her tray with the remains of breakfast.

'They will say you are a typical example of the modern generation,' she said, 'and that you certainly cannot be trusted abroad on your own.'

'But next year I have to go to Spain.'

A wail.

'So you had better take care your parents never find out.'

The dark one stopped still with a marmalade-covered finger on the way to her mouth.

'But there is a murderer here, in this house,' she said.

'I hope it isn't Mr Gerry,' said the blonde one. 'But I think it must be. He is the biggest liar. He must have tried to practise some terrible deceit on the girl and have had to kill her when things began to come out.'

'But I thought you liked him.'

The dark eyes filling with tears of bewilderment

'That is why I hope it isn't him,' the blonde said. 'But I can't think who else it could be.'

'Oh, you are so heartless. You talk as if it was a matter of a lottery.'

The blue eyes sparkled.

'Wonderful. We will have a lottery. I will bet you I guess who did the murder. Let me see. Yes. Your annotated copy of *Gammer Gurtorfs Needle* against my complete notes of Dr von Schrodeck's lectures.'

'But that is wrong. To bet on a thing like murder.'

'You know the only way to pass in English Romantic Poetry is to reproduce Dr von Schrodeck's lecture notes in full, and you were ill for two sessions,' the blonde said.

'And I must get a good mark there to make up for the viva voce. It is *so unbillig*.'

'You should say "unfair".'

'So unfair.'

'But it is a bet?'

'It is a bet.'

*

Jim Henderson knocked at the door of Mr Utamaro's room.

'Come in,' said Mr Utamaro.

Jim went in.

Mr Utamaro was sitting on the same chair as at their interview the day before. The second chair in the room was placed in front of it in the same manner.

'Good morning,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Good morning.'

The words allowed to escape, reluctantly.

'Please sit down.'

Jim continued to stand.

'If you think you can make me change my mind,' he said, 'you're mistaken.'

Mr Utamaro grinned. Stubby teeth.

'I would like to change your mind,' he said. 'But that is a task which takes years.'

'Isn't a desire to have your mind changed also necessary?' Jim said.

His fist, tightly clenched from the moment he had come into the room, relaxed.

'Sit down,' said Mr Utamaro.

Jim sat. Pulling the chair only slightly from its position directly opposite Mr Utamaro.

'And you have no desire at all to see the world in a different light?' Mr Utamaro said.

'I think I see it in a clear light,' said Jim. 'And after that there's no time to bother with the finer shades of mysticism.'

'Or any shades of mysticism at all?'

'Or any shades of mysticism. You're quite right.'

'But do you ask yourself ever if one sees best in a clear light?'

'Look,' said Jim, 'I don't. And what's more I'm never likely to. I came on this course for a limited practical reason. And while I'm here, in spite of what's happened, I might as well go on with what I came to do.'

'Unfortunately Zen is not susceptible to limited practical study,' said Mr Utamaro. 'That is what I have been trying to show you. You cannot understand Zen by reading a book about it and applying the principles of logic to what you read.'

'I certainly didn't get very far,' Jim said. 'That's why I came here.'

'That is why you came here?'

A pistol shot.

Jim's jaw hardened. A clouded and distant look in his eyes.

'Are you working for the police?' he said.

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'It seems a bit unlikely,' said Jim. 'But if you're not working for them, what's all this about?'

'I see a dish of food,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It is put before me. I must do something about it.'

'Simple curiosity, eh?'

'Yes, very simple. Curiosity uncomplicated by notions of justice, or of a good citizen's duty or anything of that sort.'

Jim smiled.

'And that's the practical outcome of Zen?' he said.

'Yes, when one has stopped subjecting everything to notions of logic and comparison, whatever comes to hand comes to hand.'

'Well, that's pretty free of all that class of flam.'

‘So the answer to my question is that you came on this course for what?’

Jim smiled again. A slight movement of the corner of the mouth.

‘The answer is that I came solely to find out about Zen. And I’ve been a wee bit surprised. Though, mind you, I’m not endorsing the system. I’m just saying it’s not as useless as I thought.’

Mr Utamaro’s hand shot forward and tweaked Jim’s nose.

‘Nothing is any use.’

A shout.

Jim sat further back in his chair. He rubbed his nose, cautiously.

‘Keep it for Miss Rohan,’ he said. ‘Though I wouldn’t do it quite so hard with her. She might forget herself and use some bad language.’

‘Do you think so?’ said Mr Utamaro.

Eager inquiry.

A gleam in Jim’s eye.

‘It might be worth finding out after all,’ he said.

‘But perhaps it would be rather stronger medicine than is necessary,’ Mr Utamaro said.

A tinge of regret.

‘Already,’ he went on, ‘I have begun to make her, as you put it, forget herself. I think a gentler shock would be enough.’

Jim looked at him. Fierce appraisal.

‘I wouldn’t be too sure of that,’ he said. ‘She’s likely to be a tougher bird than you think. Don’t be deceived by all that ladylike stuff. That’s been put there over the years, shell by shell. It won’t break so easy.’

‘So we have come to similar conclusions about Miss Rohan.’

‘Have we?’

Jim looked at Mr Utamaro again. A calculation.

'You know,' he said, 'a lot of energy goes into that bottling up process. Have you ever asked yourself what happens when it escapes?'

'A lot of things might happen. Even satori.'

'Satori, that's your famous state of enlightenment, isn't it? Well, I don't think anything as innocent as that would happen. It's nothing innocent that's been bottled up.'

'Innocent, innocent. Mr Henderson, stop blinding yourself. What is innocent? And what is not?'

'Sure, sure. I know about that. Your man Wittgenstein, and all that. But that's just evading the issue. That's what I have against you boys, you know. You won't face facts.'

'Not even for you, Mr Henderson, can I deny that there is no such thing as facing facts. There are facts, certainly, though that is a dangerous thing to call them. But they exist and we exist. We cannot make them other than they are by facing them. Or by turning our backs on them.'

'There you go again,' said Jim. 'Who the hell cares about that stuff? I could do it too, if I was prepared to waste my time. But I'm not. We weren't talking about philosophy, you know, we were talking about murder.'

Mr Utamaro shook his head. Patient sadness.

'Let us talk about what you call murder, then,' he said. 'But do not think that we shall understand each other. You do not even know you are talking a different language.'

'Nonsense,' said Jim. 'Murder's murder in any language. You can bury it in semantic twaddle if you like. But when you get down to everyday realities it's still there. Flaveen was killed. She was killed. Does it mean anything to you?'

'Oh, Mr Henderson, Mr Henderson. With your belief in facts and strict logic, to make such emotional appeals, to beg so many questions in one breath. Of course Miss Mills was killed. But it isn't as simple as that. Death means something very different to you than it means to me.'

‘Do you want to know who killed her?’

‘Yes, I do. I said so. I have been given a mystery: I want to understand it.’

‘Flaveen was a bit dumb,’ Jim said. ‘But she was a decent enough girl. I want to know who murdered her.’

‘You want to find out for your reasons, and I want to find out for no reason,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I know which of us will see most clearly what is to be seen.’

‘Provided your famous curiosity doesn’t fade away.’

‘A task is a task. It must be finished. All the parts of it must be undertaken. Did you kill Miss Mills?’

The unvarying tone.

Jim did not answer.

A long silence.

Through the tall uncurtained window of the narrow room a gleam of spring sunshine came. It lit up the scrupulously swept boards of the floor, the neatly folded straw mat which Mr Utamaro slept on, the plain lacquer box where he kept his possessions. And where he had hidden the sword.

The sunlight was softly cut off by a passing cloud.

‘I can’t think of any way at all to convince you I did not kill Flaveen Mills,’ Jim said.

‘A declaration of that nature is one way,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Another would be to tell the police what you were doing when the sword was here to be stolen.’

‘I said I wouldn’t tell them, and I haven’t told them. I still don’t see any reason for telling them.’

‘The obvious reason is that it would clear you of suspicion.’

‘If they’re fools enough to think I’m a murderer on those grounds, let them think it.’

‘You are not helping them to find out who did kill Miss Mills.’

'If they think that just because I don't choose to tell them something that has nothing to do with the murder then I must be the killer, they're such fools they'll never find who they're looking for. But I don't think they are such fools. I think your man Superintendent Padbourne is pretty shrewd. He isn't concentrating on me entirely. I'm not hindering him that much. And I think I've pretty good reasons for keeping my mouth shut.'

'To me as well as to the police?'

'To you, to them, and to anybody.'

'It's another way of proving your guiltlessness, I suppose. It is hard to face being called a fool, even for a policeman.'

Mr Utamaro grinned.

'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' he said.

Jim stood up.

'If any queries come up in my reading,' he said, 'I'll come to you. And if you'll do me a favour, you won't let the sound of one hand clapping or - what is it? - "what was your original face before you were born?" or any of that stuff stand between you and your curiosity. I'm counting on that.'

Abruptly he pushed out his hand. Mr Utamaro shook it.

'You ought for your own good to tell me,' he said.

'I'm telling nobody.'

Mr Utamaro sat on alone in the empty room.

Sometimes the sunshine came through the window. Sometimes a cloud blotted it out. Mr Utamaro sat unmoving on the battered kitchen chair facing the door. In front of him stood the second chair, slightly out of its symmetrical position as Jim had left it. A fly buzzed in at the slightly open window and circled slowly round the bare electric light bulb.

*

'I think perhaps it is Mr Henderson,' said the dark girl.

Wondering at her own daring.

'Pfui.'

‘But everyone knows he is telling this big lie.’

‘One lie. What is that? Mr Gerry tells one lie every hour.’

‘But why do you go on liking him if you think he is so bad? I think he is bad, and I do not like him at all.’

‘But he likes you. That is the secret of tragedy. I shall put that in my answer to question four in the aesthetics paper.’

‘But how do you know question four will give you a chance of saying a thing like that?’

‘My dear child, question four in the aesthetics paper is always: what is the nature of Tragedy? You will never pass if you take so little notice of the realities of life.’

‘But even if you are right, it is so difficult to answer.’

‘That is true. It is difficult to answer. But I am beginning to understand. Life is teaching me. In tragedy there must always be an element of unrequited passion. Make a note of that. Get it into your answer. It is true. I feel it here.’

A hand laid on the heart. And the neckline tugged down half an inch.

‘If I pretend to go into the garden for some fresh air,’ she said, ‘I may see him.’

‘He is upstairs in his room,’ the dark one said. ‘I met him as I was bringing in the washing. He chased me upstairs.’

‘And you never told me. You bitch. That is the colloquial word. You bitch.’

‘But I am not. What does it exactly mean? Ought one to use such a word in compositions? English is so difficult.’

‘Tell me, did he catch you? The truth now.’

A slow blush.

‘Yes, he did catch me.’

The small voice.

‘And what did he do?’

Blue eyes bright. Avid curiosity.

‘He kissed me.’

‘And then?’

'I broke away and ran into our room. I locked the door.'

'You locked the door?'

'Of course.'

'And in tragedy there must too be the element of irony.'

Chapter 13

Jim Henderson joined the rest of the party in the meditation hall. They were sitting on the two rows of canvas chairs facing each other.

The chair that Flaveen Mills had used had been discreetly removed.

But no amount of discretion could remove the fact of her death.

The constable coming in at regular intervals. The polite requests that one of them should see Superintendent Padbourne in the warden's office.

They sat for the most part in silence. If they talked it would be about the murder. No one appeared to want to say more than had already been said about that.

Mr Utamaro had directed them to consider the koan, 'If all things are reducible to One, what is One to be reduced to?'

It had awakened no enthusiasm.

Jim sat on the chair left vacant for him without a word. No one greeted him.

Gerry lit a cigarette. The ashtray at his feet was crowded with butts.

Mr Applecheek stood up.

'All things appear to me to be reducible to the death of that poor girl,' he said. 'I shall take a walk in the garden. It is unfortunately true that pleasant scenes can distract us. I shall be weak enough to allow that to happen.'

The others paid little attention.

Mr Applecheek went to the door and opened it.

'My cowardly escape will go unnoticed,' he said.

He left them with a vague gesture. Perhaps of benediction.

There was no longer a constable at the front door and Mr Applecheek hurried out and round the house to the lawn under the massy cedar of Lebanon. Once in sight of the tree he slowed down and gazed up into its dark branches as he slowly walked towards the creviced trunk.

When he got up to it he gave the gnarled bark a friendly pat and said:

‘No doubt, my dear fellow, you will be as uncommunicative as my fellow students, but at least I will not be in a continual state of wondering how much you know. From you I have no secrets.’

He patted back into place a loose flap of bark.

Mr Utamaro.

Like a jack-in-the-box stepping from behind the enormous trunk.

For a moment Mr Applecheek quailed.

‘The trouble with keeping a secret,’ Mr Utamaro said, ‘is that after a while it keeps you.’

‘Very true, my dear fellow, very true. And remarkably apposite, too. Though perhaps, as is the way of epigrams, just a little too bright, too somehow shiny.’

‘It is a question of using whatever weapon comes to hand,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘The main thing is that the attack must be as much of a shock as possible. Though in this particular case I had no great hopes.’

The slight trouble with the letter / . A trace of what in an Englishman would be pedantry.

‘It is a curious thing,’ said Mr Applecheek, ‘but in spite of my burden of guilt I seem to be impervious to sudden accusations and unexpected betrayals. Perhaps it is because I have so often anticipated them in my mind.’

'I noticed on Sunday evening how little Mr Manvers' discovery of you in this tree disconcerted you. That was what made me doubt of success just now.'

'Yes,' Mr Applecheek said, 'I had that very incident in mind. It was a delightful example of what one, to use a slang egression, gets away with. I had no doubt both you and the others felt the matter needed an explanation, but by simply not offering one I evaded the necessity of entering into, details painful to myself.'

He shrugged his shoulders. At length.

'Anyhow, my dear chap,' he said, 'I'm delighted to have had this conversation with you. Delighted. Of course, a clergyman ought not to avoid painful confessions etcetera, but possibly to an anti-religious such as yourself the spectacle of one doing so would be pleasing. I don't know. I don't really know.'

The voice trailing away. Mr Applecheek trailing away. Across the smooth turf, back towards the house. Trailing, drifting. Still wearing a pair of leather slippers, heel less, sloppy.

He reached the corner and without looking back lifted his left hand and let it fall in a gesture of gradual farewell.

In ten strides Mr Utamaro caught up with him. In two strides more he passed him. He wheeled round and stood facing him on the coarse gravel of the drive.

A tuft of grass growing precariously in the unpropitious ground.

Mr Utamaro standing feet astride, a broad shape blocking the way. In the breeze his black kimono stirred slightly, revealing the solid body underneath. Mr Applecheek halted. Off balance, tall, stooping, faintly swaying.

Mr Utamaro's hand shot up. The index finger pointing at Mr Applecheek's chest. A rock steady weapon.

'Why did you kill Flaveen Mills?' he said.

Mr Applecheek stopped blinking.

For an instant he looked at Mr Utamaro with wide eyes. Then gradually the eyelids sank until the lashes met. A weight yielded to.

Nothing said.

Shoulders slowly drooping.

Mr Utamaro stood without moving. Legs astride, firmly planted. Broad shoulders unbulging, blocking the way. Hand still extended, the index finger pointing without a quiver.

'Oh dear,' said Mr Applecheek.

Mr Utamaro was silent.

'Could I sit down?' Mr Applecheek said.

Each word uttered with difficulty. Escaping from under a weighty trapdoor.

The stocky Japanese took him by the arm. A single deliberate swift movement.

He led him quietly round the corner of the house again, across the lawn to the stone seat where he had talked about death to Flaveen Mills.

Mr Applecheek sat down and felt at the cool stone. Reassurance sought. The immovable stone. His eyes closed again.

Mr Utamaro sat beside him. Waiting.

The old clergyman opened his eyes.

'I didn't kill the girl,' he said. 'Whatever else is to be said, I did not actually take the weapon and strike.'

'And yet you killed her,' said Mr Utamaro.

The grave voice.

Mr Applecheek turned to him abruptly. Skinny fingers clasping the black cotton of Mr Utamaro's kimono, taut, feverish.

'Haven't I been saying just that to myself at every hour of the day since she was found? And condemned myself time and time again?'

His hand fell back. He gave a low moan.

'You ought to have told the superintendent,' Mr Utamaro said. 'Why did you give yourself this torture? Surely you didn't think that you could conceal your theft of the sword for ever?'

'Don't you know that that is what I did think?' said Mr Applecheek.

'Yes, I do know. The question was mostly rhetorical. But you deluded yourself.'

'I deluded myself,' said Mr Applecheek. 'And I knew I was deluding myself. Was I succeeding in tricking my own mind? I don't know, I really don't know.'

'But now you have a chance of becoming of one mind,' Mr Utamaro said.

'My dear chap, I told you before. I am too old for it. Too old. You will have to let me go on in my stupid way, indulging in one little theft every three months or so until I go to my grave. I'm altogether too tired to rise out of my past now.'

A hint of the old tone.

'Now then,' said Mr Utamaro, 'you saw me take the sword out of the cabinet when you climbed the cedar on Sunday evening?'

'Yes.'

'You climbed up there to look at the sword?'

'I did.'

'You came on the course with the idea of taking the sword in mind?'

'Yes. And no.'

'Naturally. You were of two minds. You told yourself you had a right to be interested in comparative religions. That you had time on your hands because the bishop wouldn't give you any duties, and that this was as good a way of occupying yourself as any.'

‘Yes, you are quite right. The common pattern. You know it well.’

‘I know it from experience,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘And I know that it need not always be followed.’

‘No reform, no reform, I beg.’

Mr Applecheek lifted a hand in protest. A returning elaboration in gesture.

‘You also told yourself that even if the sword was on display at the course, as you had read in the newspapers that it would be, you had a right to look at it.’

‘Yes, I told myself that. Put it all in.’

‘You told yourself that you need not necessarily give way to temptation on this occasion and at the same time you told yourself that there was a pleasure in the very temptation and that it was a pleasure you could allow yourself because you had been hard done by life.’

‘The indictment. I plead guilty to it. To it all.’

‘So when you had seen me move the sword it was an easy matter to go up to my room when I was sitting in the dining room after dinner, playing with Mr Manvers’ tweeters – is that the word? – and take it.’

‘It was dreadfully easy.’

‘And you hid the sword. Where?’

‘Ah, you don’t know that?’

‘No.’

‘I hid it in the tree there. In a deep cleft in the trunk a short way up.’

‘Of course, someone mentioned there was a hole where the wood had gone rotten at the time Mrs Manvers climbed the tree.’

‘Yes, that was when I discovered it had gone. I didn’t at all know what was happening just then. I wondered about blackmail, about practical jokes, about anything but what turned out to be the truth.’

Mr Applecheek took Mr Utamaro's arm again. The thin gnarled fingers fierce with conviction.

'You don't know how terrible it was,' he said. 'In my little world of private sin I was almost cosy. The regular round of temptation and fall, my petty thefts and the little escapades they brought about. My hairbreadth avoidances of exposure, such as that childish business with Miss Rohan's ring. They were all somehow familiar, warm, usual. And into that little world came that silly poor girl and the person who wanted to kill her. And I helped.'

'If you are going to see the world the right way round you must succumb to even more terrible shocks,' said Mr Utamaro.

'I am too old. I am too old. Can't you understand that? I am too old to change. That is why I took Miss Rohan's ring. It was a little bit of comfort for me. While it was happening I forgot that the sword had been stolen from me for what purpose I dared not think. Don't you see that?'

A deep flush blotchily staining the old man's parchment cheeks. His voice uncontrolled, harsh.

'And then your attitude when I surprised you from behind the tree just now,' said Mr Utamaro. 'I said to myself "He is incorrigible" though, of course, I used the word loosely, as is the way of the world. You know that there is no such thing as incorrigibility.'

'I know no such thing.'

A renewed spark from the dying fire.

'We shall see. Now, can you tell about what time the sword must have been taken from the hiding place you had put it into?'

'No.'

Sudden vehemence.

'You mean that you will not tell me?'

'Yes, I mean that. Please don't ask me.'

Mr Utamaro remained silent for a little.

‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘that the time the sword was taken out of the tree indicates to you the person who took it.’

‘My responsibility in the matter has ceased,’ said Mr Applecheek.

The bony jaw set obstinately.

‘You will tell me,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘No.’

‘Yes. Not for the sake of what you have to say but for your own sake.’

‘Leave me alone.’

‘One day,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘when Hakuin presented his views to his master, Shoji, who was sitting on the veranda, the master simply said “Rubbish.” Hakuin went on speaking and Shoji caught hold of him, hit him about the head and pushed him off the balcony. When Hakuin had recovered from his fall, he went and bowed to the master. Shoji said: “You cave-dwelling beast.” Next day Hakuin came to Shoji again and when he had exhausted himself the master pushed him out of the window so that he was knocked senseless. Hakuin came back and bowed to Shoji who again called him a cave-dwelling animal. But a little later when Hakuin was going about his business a certain trivial occurrence opened his eyes to the truth of Zen. He hurried back to the monastery. The master saw him entering the gate and called him over. Hakuin told him of his experience and Shoji tenderly stroked him and said: “You have it at last.”’

‘I don’t care,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘No doubt Hakuin was a younger man. I am too old to be knocked senseless.’

‘You are so near,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He leant towards the old clergyman, sweat glistening on his forehead.

‘One more fall from the window,’ he said. ‘One more and it will perhaps be enough.’

Mr Applecheek stood up. His hands pushing his awkward body up from the stone seat.

‘Goodbye,’ he said. ‘I am going. I am going to read the paper.’

Mr Utamaro got up and walked beside him. Slowly across the sun dappled lawn.

‘Then if you won’t tell me, I shall have to tell you,’ he said.

‘Do what you like,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘But I very much doubt if you can tell me who took that sword from the tree.’

‘Well,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘you have made me certain already that the sword must have stayed in the tree all night. Anyone could have come and taken it during the hours of darkness, so if it had gone by the morning you would not now know who had taken it.’

Mr Applecheek said nothing. Painful steps across the lawn and round into the house.

‘And equally,’ Mr Utamaro went on, ‘the first part of the morning when everybody was going about their own affairs here and there would not provide the right conditions. Then at nine o’clock everyone was in the meditation hall where I set you the koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” So no one was in a position to relieve you of your prize then.’

At the word ‘prize’ Mr Applecheek groaned quietly but he made no other comment.

‘A little after nine yesterday morning,’ Mr Utamaro continued, ‘Mr Stuart came to see me and I went back with him and found you all still assembled.’

‘How do you know someone didn’t leave us while you were talking to Stuart?’ said Mr Applecheek.

A jet of malice.

‘But they did not,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘No, they didn’t’

‘There is a certain impressiveness about the meditation ritual. One does not wander away from it. So that brings us to my sanzen interview with you. After it you told me that it was time you went and read the paper. You said you needed the comfort. So that was when you went and made sure the sword was still in its place.’

‘All this is as nothing to me.’

Petulance.

‘And then at ten o’clock – you see I am firmly under the sway of Major Francis and his timetable although I carry no watch – and then at ten I gave my lecture on flower arrangement. At which you were present and of those we are considering only Miss Rohan was absent. I do not think we need go any further. It was shortly after that that Mrs Manvers climbed the tree and you found out the sword was no longer there.’

‘I hope you feel happier for what you have discovered,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Miss Rohan seems to me to be a lady of a sort one seldom finds nowadays and that girl seemed to be quite worthless. I am not willing to judge between them. I hope you will find it easier.’

He walked off along the corridor towards the common room. Hasty, ungainly steps. Mr Utamaro looked at him until the door of the common room closed. With a testy jerk.

Then he sat quietly down cross-legged on the floor underneath the notice board – *Major Francis, Warden, will be on annual leave* – and bowed his head in thought.

He did not appear to hear Superintendent Padbourne walking quietly out of the warden’s office and along into the hall. The superintendent saw him at once. He looked down at the squatting figure in the black kimono, head bowed, body relaxed and without movement.

The piggy eyes looked upwards briefly, in despair.

Superintendent Padbourne put his hand to his mouth and coughed. Briskly.

Mr Utamaro looked up.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ said the superintendent.

Mr Utamaro got to his feet. In a single movement, without fuss.

‘Yes, indeed, superintendent,’ he said. ‘I was thinking over a conversation I had just been having. I’m afraid I sat there without realizing what I was doing. I try in Europe to use chairs for sitting on, but when I am preoccupied I forget.’

‘It must be difficult, sir,’ said Superintendent Padbourne.

A duty done.

‘I was looking for you as a matter of fact,’ he went on. ‘I want a few words with you if I may.’

‘Certainly, superintendent.’

Mr Utamaro looked at him with calm appraisal.

‘Would you care to accompany me back to the warden’s office? We shall be in private there.’

A touch of sharpness.

‘Certainly,’ said Mr Utamaro.

He followed the superintendent along the corridor, past the closed common room door and into the warden’s office.

The former butler’s pantry. A small room lined with deep shelves smooth from much use. They had been divided by Major Francis into pigeon holes and in each hole there was a small pile of papers. Sterile eggs. Where the walls of the room were clear of shelves notices, graphs, and examples of semiofficial publicity were pinned cheek by jowl. On the small table which served as a desk there was a telephone, an ‘in’ tray, an ‘out’ tray and a ‘pending’ tray – all empty – a diary and a movable calendar.

The calendar registered the day on which Major Francis, Warden, had begun his leave. A large printed calendar, hanging on the back of the door, had the days neatly crossed out up to the same date.

Superintendent Padbourne took the swivel chair at the table. He gestured towards the bentwood chair that completed the office furnishings and said:

‘Please sit down. Er – that is if you want a chair’

Mr Utamaro sat on the bentwood chair.

‘What can I do to help you?’ he said.

‘Miss Mills was last seen alive by Miss Rohan just before 12.30 p.m. yesterday,’ Superintendent Padbourne said. ‘The doctor tells me that she must have been dead by at least 1.30 p.m. What were you doing between those times?’

‘I think I can answer that without any trouble,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I saw Miss Rohan a few moments after she had last seen Miss Mills. I was standing in the hall and she complained to me of Miss Mills’ behaviour.’

‘Yes.’

‘Mr Manvers joined us and told me he was looking for his wife. I said I was going to take a walk and would keep an eye out for her. I walked all the way to the top of the grounds, which took about ten minutes. And there I had a conversation with Mrs Manvers whom I found in the little summer house in the spinney. Mr Manvers eventually joined us, and I continued my walk and came back to the house when it was lunch time.’

‘Yes,’ said the superintendent again. ‘As it so happens almost all that has been confirmed by those two German girls who watched you from various upper windows as they went about their work. They seemed to have precious little else to do. It means, as I thought, that I can leave you out of account in my investigation. And, what’s more important, it means that I can call on you to cooperate.’

‘You can call,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘But will I answer?’

Superintendent Padbourne’s small eyes went suddenly smaller.

‘What do you mean?’

‘That you may find me not as helpful as you expect.’

‘But – But why not? Are you telling me you intend to obstruct the course of justice? You may not hold British nation-ality, but, let me tell you, your duty in this matter is quite plain. You are to assist the police in any way reasonably in your power.’

Mr Utamaro grinned.

‘I have upset you, superintendent,’ he said.

‘Yes, sir, you have. I make no bones about it. Flagrantly to suggest that you will conceal information: it may be well enough in Japan – I don’t know how the police conduct themselves there – but let me make it perfectly clear here and now, it won’t do in England.’

Mr Utamaro grinned again.

‘I am afraid I intended to upset you,’ he said.

‘You intended to upset me?’

Incredulity.

‘Yes, I wanted to make you understand from the start. It is what you would call fair that you should know. You see, superintendent, I have trained my mind to the point where such things as the idea of justice, the notion of a citizen’s duty, the concept of illegality, all mean nothing to me. If you understand that, you will know where you are. And that is important.’

‘We’ll get this straight,’ said the superintendent.

Piggy eyes fixed on Mr Utamaro.

‘You are telling me that in certain circumstances you would do all you could to prevent me arresting a murderer?’

‘No, I am not saying that. Though it might prove to be true. You see, even logic means nothing to me.’

‘Stop.’

The superintendent held up his right hand.

‘Now listen,’ he said, ‘I don’t happen to have had any experience of the Far East, but naturally I’ve read about your mystics and the sort of thing they do. All right, all that

is beyond me, but I suppose it means a lot to you. But, understand this much, when you're over here it won't wash. You'll have to drop it. You'll have to go by the rules of plain, ordinary commonsense for a bit.'

'But, superintendent, that is impossible. I cannot go back to a state of mind which I have sloughed off.'

'If you'll excuse me, sir,' said the superintendent, 'that's simply nonsense. I'm not asking you to perform any wonderful mental feat. All I'm asking is that in any dealings between us you should apply the ordinary rules of simple logic. They exist all the time, whether you choose to abide by them or not. And as far as your relations with me are concerned I insist that you do abide by them.'

'I am sorry, superintendent,' said Mr Utamaro, 'but you might as well insist that a blind man uses the ordinary rules of seeing.'

'If in the course of an investigation I came across a man who had nothing physically wrong with his eyes and who merely preferred not to use them I would insist that he obeyed the ordinary rules of seeing if that was going to help me. Please re-member that. Deliberately obstructing the police in the course of their duties is an offence. You could land yourself in prison.'

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'It would not make any difference to me,' he said.

'We'd see about that,' said the superintendent. 'When a man knows he is to go to prison in a week it has a wonderful effect on his memory.'

'We must hope it won't come to that,' said Mr Utamaro. 'I have warned you what the worst may be, but a Zen enlightened man lives with what comes to hand. A riddle has been thrust in my face. I take it up.'

'Oh, so now you intend to solve this case by the exercise of your mystic powers while the poor policemen plod along and get nowhere?'

‘There are no mystic powers, superintendent. The only advantages I have are that, first, I am not trammelled by notions of logic and so I see facts for what they are and not for what they ought to be, and, second, that I have already studied the people you must suspect.’

‘Ah,’ said the superintendent, ‘now perhaps we’re getting somewhere. That’s my difficulty. These people have no connexion with this place or with each other, and yet one of them stole that sword to kill the girl with. That’s premeditation if you like. On the face of it there’s no reason why any of them should have killed her. Of course, I’m having inquiries made and something may come to light which shows a definite connexion between the girl and one of them. Then we shall be on our way. But it’s only fair to tell you that first results are disappointing. The question is: have you done any better? I don’t deny it’s possible. And, if you have, are you going to let me know what you’ve found out?’

‘Of course I am.’

The piggy eyes blinked rapidly.

‘All right,’ said the superintendent, ‘I give it up. You may help me or you may not. I’ll just stand by and be grateful for whatever crumbs you let me pick up. Very well. But I’m warning you: if you get hold of something which it is your duty to report and don’t report it I’m taking action at once.’

‘That is tomorrow,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘and tomorrow the murder may not have been committed.’

The superintendent looked at him. A moment of concentration.

‘Certainly the full result of the post-mortem is not to hand,’ he said. ‘But I think I’ll be investigating murder tomorrow just the same. As to what victim we shall have, that’s another matter.’

‘So you haven’t found out very much about Miss Mills?’ said Mr Utamaro.

'I suppose this is one way of conducting an inquiry,' the superintendent said. 'I seem to get down to what I want to know in the end. But if I ever find I haven't time for oriental fandangos you'd better drop it quick. As for your question, we haven't found out very much about Miss Mills. In fact we've found out nothing. Nothing at all.'

'Which is something.'

'All right, play it your way. Which is something. Something that needs explaining, if I'm not mistaken. She told young Henderson that she had no address, apparently. She had been in some digs somewhere and gave them up to save money when she came down here. He told me that much before he got on his high horse.'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr Utamaro, 'Mr Henderson's high horse. I asked him if he would dismount but he preferred to ride on. All the same I think if you give it some thought that particular horse will turn out not to be a horse at all.'

'I take it you're saying no more.'

'There is no need.'

'All right, I won't press it this time. Can you tell me anything about the girl?'

Mr Utamaro considered.

'She was not very interested in Zen,' he said.

'She wasn't, was she? Then there is some mystery or other there. I dare say a little patient work will bring it to light. Though there are plenty of people in this country who could disappear without anyone wanting to know what's happened to them. Still, we shall see. Now, anyone else a dull pupil?'

'Mr Manvers is unwilling more obviously than the others.'

'Yes, though that's capable of explanation. In fact I've had plenty from Mrs M. already. Now, about her, can you tell -'

Running steps along the corridor. The door jerked wide open. Honor Manvers.

She stood grasping the doorknob with her hand held rigid at an awkward angle. Her hair was disarranged. A black smudge ran from just under her left ear across to about an inch away from her nose.

‘Mr Utamaro,’ she said, ‘I wanted you.’

Chapter 14

Unexpectedly Superintendent Padbourne stood up.

'I'm just off,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll see you later, Mr Utamaro.'

His left eye closed in a rapid wink.

'Is there such a thing as later, superintendent?' said Mr Utamaro.

But the superintendent left them hastily – discreetly – without answering.

'How does he get on with Zen?' said Honor.

'He is very far away,' Mr Utamaro said. 'And so he may be quite near.'

'I wouldn't have thought a Zen policeman would be a great success,' Honor said.

'It is possible to seek satori, to live on satori, and still move in the world, and successfully too,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Is it?' Honor said. 'I suppose it may be.'

Distant.

Mr Utamaro said nothing and looked at her. Standing with his shaven bullet head thrust forward from between his heavy shoulders.

Silence in the room with the pigeon holes and the charts and the lists on the walls.

'I'm glad the superintendent went,' Honor said at last. 'I particularly wanted to avoid him.'

'He seemed as anxious to get away from you as you from him,' Mr Utamaro said.

The bland, blank face.

'Yes,' said Honor.

Still distant. An inner debate. Not at the vote stage, quite. Honor slowly closed the door.

'I've got something I want to tell you,' she said.

'There is nothing to stop you speaking. I cannot promise to listen.'

'But you must.'

A sudden flare.

'You must. This is important. I know who killed that girl.'

'Miss Flaveen Mills?'

'Yes, of course. Who else could I be speaking of?'

'Almost anybody.'

Honor frowned. She flung herself down in the bentwood chair on which Mr Utamaro had been sitting, and looked up at him.

'I don't understand you,' she said.

'But I wonder if I do understand you?' said Mr Utamaro. 'You speak of "that girl" as if you didn't wish to admit her identity.'

'It was just a phrase. What nonsense is this?'

Honor stood up. Abruptly. Jerkily.

'Look,' she said, 'I happened to use one form of words rather than another. That's all. There's nothing to it.'

'But they were the words you chose,' Mr Utamaro said.

Honor whirled round and took hold of her chair back.

'Don't you want to know who it is?' she said. 'For heaven's sake, I tell you I know who murdered that - who murdered Flaveen and all you do is quibble over the wording.'

'You told me you knew who the murderer was,' said Mr Utamaro. 'You mentioned nothing about telling me the name.'

Honor picked her handbag off the warden's desk where she had let it fall when she first sat down. She was suddenly

moving with deliberation.

She opened the bag, peered into it, took out a packet of cigarettes and a black holder.

‘You don’t smoke, Mr Utamaro, do you?’ she said.

‘I tried one when I first came to Europe,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I thought it would Europeanize me, but it made me sick.’

Honor lit her cigarette with the lighter she had found after scrabbling in the depths of her bag. She sat on the corner of the warden’s desk, inhaled deeply and blew out a cloud of grey smoke.

The-warden’s ‘in’ tray was displaced two inches. Mr Utamaro looked perturbed.

‘You’re quite right,’ Honor said. ‘I mentioned nothing about telling you the name. And of course I’m not going to tell you. How did you know? There are times when you frighten me.’

Mr Utamaro grinned. The stump teeth.

‘Of course I frighten you,’ he said. ‘Your business is to build up fantasies because you think facts are too hard to bear. I look at facts.’

‘But how did you know I wasn’t going to tell you the name?’

‘Because of what you said. You said you knew who killed Miss Mills. The fact of your knowledge was what you wanted to tell me. If you had wanted so urgently to tell me something else you would have said something else.’

‘Well,’ said Honor, ‘are you going to ask me who it is now?’

Bristling.

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘No?’

‘No.’

Honor slid off the warden’s table. She walked across and looked out of the single narrow window. Then she turned

round.

‘At least let me tell you something,’ she said.

‘There is nothing to stop you.’

Mr Utamaro carefully put the warden’s ‘in’ tray back to its exact place.

Honor marched up to him and stood, her face thrust towards his, glaring at him.

‘All right. I told you I knew who the murderer is for one very good reason. And for the same good reason I’m not telling you the name.’

Mr Utamaro stood looking at her face close to his. The savage lipstick, the make-up half concealing sharp lines.

‘And that reason is,’ Honor went on, ‘that I want a scoop for *The World*. I’m not telling a soul till I can go to the police with something they can’t ignore and come to an arrangement with them. But I must have a watertight case or the police won’t play. So I’ve got to tell someone I can trust what I’m doing in case anything goes wrong, and you’re the only one of us I can be sure is innocent, if I have made a mistake.’

‘Innocent,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘No one is innocent. Each jewel in the net contains the reflection of all the others.’

*

The blonde girl flung open the door.

Eyes suddenly wide. Mouth wider.

‘Mr Gerry,’ she said, ‘what are you doing in our bedroom?’

‘Aha, that’d be telling, as the actress said to the bishop,’ said Gerry.

‘But Mr Utamaro wants you at once. He sent me to find you.’

‘And little did you think you’d catch me bending here, eh? And what does old Utey want?’

The perfect unconcern. The changed subject.

'I do not know. I am here only as domestic help. I am not told anything. It was simply that I saw him leaving the warden's office with Mrs Manvers, and when she went away he said to me "I wonder if you could find Mr Manvers quickly for me?"'

'He said quickly?'

'Yes. So I came up here to ask my colleague if she had seen-'

'And little did you think etcetera. We're back where we came in. Ta, ta, both,' said Gerry.

Neither girl spoke.

Gerry closed the door with elaborate slowness, jerked it open again, put his head round it and said:

'Caught you.'

He bobbed out. The girls looked at the door for two minutes in silence. Then the dark one said:

'What did he mean about the bishop? I do not understand.'

'You do not understand. That is good. So I do not understand either. What is Mr Gerry doing in here with you?'

'Aber - aber das ist nicht leicht zu erklären.'

'Stop. Remember it was you who begged to have a pact always to speak in English. Always or not at all.'

'But it is not easy to explain.'

Tears hanging in the dark lashes.

'No, I am sure of that. But all the same an explanation there must be.'

'No, it is too hard. I cannot.'

'Then it will be my sad duty to inform your parents.'

A deep sigh. The blonde head nodding to and fro so gravely.

'But no, no. Oh, you mustn't. You mustn't. Swear to me you won't. I will do anything, anything.'

'Then I shall have to hear it all. Down to the least detail. It won't be very nice for me, I know. But it is my duty.'

The back straightened. The corners of the mouth pulled down.

'Then I will tell you. It was about ten minutes ago.'

'Ten minutes. Such a short time.'

'A short time?'

'Yes. If you have only ten minutes to explain, it is hardly worth while.'

'But Mr Gerry chased me.'

'Naturally.'

'But I ran in here.'

'Quite commendable.'

'But he pushed the door open before I could lock it.'

'Naturally.'

'But he kissed me.'

'How many times?'

'Only once. I pushed him away.'

'I would have done the same myself. An element of wrestling is always excellent. Go on.'

'And then you came in.'

'I am so sorry.'

'No. I was never so glad to see anyone in all my life.'

'Admirable sentiments. However we are not composing a letter to your parents.'

'But you said you wouldn't. You promised. You can't -'

'Quiet, quiet, my child. There will be no letter to your parents. After all it seems there has been, in the English idiom, nothing to write home about.'

*

Gerry found Mr Utamaro in his own room. He knocked, turned the handle without waiting for answer, clicked his

heels, bowed round the edge of the half-open door, and said:

‘Was there something?’

‘Come in, Mr Manvers.’

The inevitable chairs. Mr Utamaro facing the door, the empty chair facing the window behind him.

‘Let’s get right away from the gestapo touch, old boy,’ Gerry said.

He picked up the chair near the door and plonked it beside Mr Utamaro’s. Mr Utamaro did not move.

Gerry sat down, leant back and tilted his chair as far as it would go.

‘Now we’re palsy-walsy,’ he said. ‘What’s the trouble, old cock? Any little thing Gerry boy can do?’

‘How did you know that Mr Henderson stole the sword, Mr Manvers?’ Mr Utamaro said.

With a bang Gerry’s chair came forward.

‘Jim Henderson steal the sword?’ he said. ‘Was that what happ – Or did -?’

He paused. Tilted back in his chair again.

‘You’ve been taken for a ride, boy,’ he said. ‘Jim Henderson never stole that sword. Or if he did I know nothing about it. Flaveen must have passed on something I said to her for a bit of kidding. She was going on about the sword, and I thought she’d be easy game, so I told her I’d seen our Jim pinch it. She was a bit gone on him, you know, and I thought I’d gum up the works. Silly kid, she fell for the lot.’

‘I see,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘And in the world of binding logic falsehood is mistaken for truth, because no one realizes they are the same thing, and the simple joke enters the domain of murder.’

Gerry slowly brought his chair forward on to all its four legs. He stood up and took out a cigarette. As he lit it he

said:

‘So what did you want to see me about?’

‘I asked you about the sword,’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘Yes, but you’ve just been talking to my wife.’

‘I have.’

‘And then you asked to see yours truly.’

‘Yours truly? I don’t quite understand.’

‘Common expression, old boy. Means oneself, yours truly, like on a letter.’

‘Ah, yours truly. A good phrase.’

‘It’s just something people say. I don’t know why.’

‘Perhaps it is because they are not true.’

Gerry took his cigarette case from his pocket again, flicked it open, and held it out to Mr Utamaro.

‘I know you don’t carry’em, old boy,’ he said. ‘But do you ever relax and smoke O.P.s? Oh, oh, hold it, hold it. O.P.s. I’ll explain. I don’t want any dirty cracks arising from that. O.P.s equals Other People’s. Get it? No double meaning. Just a little joke.’

‘And at that moment a little joke was necessary?’ said Mr. Utamaro.

Gerry snapped the cigarette case shut.

‘There you go again,’ he said. ‘I hate to tell you this, but you’re crackers, you know. Absolutely round the bend. Mad.’

‘Yes, I am,’ said Mr Utamaro.

The bland face.

‘I am mad,’ Mr Utamaro went on, ‘because I do not subscribe to the conventions that govern your world. It must be difficult for you. But it cannot be changed.’

Gerry sat down again. He looked at Mr Utamaro, and slowly blew out smoke from his cigarette.

‘But the question is,’ he said, ‘are you mad all the time?’

‘Yes, I am,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘But sometimes, you will be sorry to hear, I behave as if I am sane. I act in accordance

with the rules of your world by coincidence.'

'As I thought. So just tell me why you wanted to see me, eh? What did Honor say to you?'

'She told me she knew who had killed Flaveen Mills.'

'Yes?'

Guarded.

'But she did not, of course, mention a name.'

'Oh.'

A pause.

'No little hints?' Gerry asked.

'No.'

'Well that's all right then. No harm done. She had me worried you know. You won't believe this, but I have to look after her as if she was off her nut too, like a headshrinker who's pretty sure the patient ought to be locked up but likes getting the cheque for the fees. She says the craziest things at times. And I'm the one who can't be trusted not to make a charley of everything each time I open my mouth.'

'So you are neither of you what you seem,' Mr Utamaro said.

'No. You've got it in one, boy. We aren't what we seem. Still, if everything's okay for the time being I'll push off.'

Gerry strolled over to the door. He put out a hand to the doorknob. It slipped round in his sweaty palm.

He turned it and opened the door.

Mr Utamaro looked at him.

'Cheery-bye,' said Gerry.

'I shall see you later,' Mr Utamaro said.

'It'll be a pleasure,' said Gerry.

He closed the door behind him quickly.

*

The dark girl came into the kitchen with a tray of dirty coffee cups.

'Well,' said the blonde one.

'Well?'

'Well, what are they doing? What are they talking about? Are they all there?'

'Yes, they are all there.'

'Then there's been no arrest. Are they all talking to each other?'

'They seemed to be.'

'You must keep your eyes open when you see them all together like that. That is when you can learn things. Did you learn anything just now?'

'No, they were sitting there like the students always do at coffee time.'

'Oh, my poor child. There has been a murder. They are the suspects. And you say they looked like all the other students.'

'But they did. You know they are not a lot of *Halbstarke*. No, wait. I know the English. Um. A lot of – It is to do with the clothes. Ah yes. Teddy Boys.'

'Except that nowadays one says Teds only.'

'Well, they are not a lot of Teds. They look like ordinary people.'

'And what were those so ordinary people talking about?'

'I didn't listen.'

'She didn't listen.'

'But wait, I remember now.'

'So. What was it?'

'They were talking about the weather.'

'The weather. Oh, those English. No, a moment. They were talking quite loudly?'

'Yes, I think they were. That is why I noticed what they were saying.'

'Exactly. They were talking in loud voices about the weather. Have you noticed what the weather is like today?'

‘But of course. I always write in my diary an account of the weather.’

‘A very useful and commendable habit. And what are you going to write about today?’

‘It is mostly overcast with occasional sun, but not much.’

‘Good. And what were they saying about the weather exactly?’

‘Let me think. Yes. Miss Rohan said, “Isn’t it splendidly sunny for so early in the year.” I remember that.’

‘Good. And would you describe today as “splendidly sunny”?’

‘But it isn’t. It is hardly sunny at all.’

‘Excellent. And from this we deduce that they are at this instant no longer making loud and inaccurate remarks about the weather.’

*

‘And have you been to see the superintendent, Mr Applecheek?’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Yes, indeed. I have been to see him, or rather I was summoned,’ Mr Applecheek said.

‘And what did you think of him?’ said Miss Rohan.

She was sitting on one of the tubular chairs put into the common room to eke out the few battered utility armchairs. Her upright back.

Mr Applecheek, his long body spread along one of the armchairs, answered:

‘Superintendent Padbourne? A splendid fellow, a splendid fellow. Just a little sharp now and again.’

Mr Utamaro, also sitting in a tubular chair, leant forward.

‘Did you have much to tell him?’ he said.

‘Much to tell him? Well, I ought not to have had a great deal. We clergy are meant to be a little above the mêlée, you know. Ah, the ideal and the real.’

'Did you tell him everything?' Mr Utamaro said.

'My dear chap, every blessed thing. In general terms, of course. You know, though I am a little High myself, frankly I discourage confession in my parishioners. I find it sometimes embarrassing. And when they insist, as alas there are always some that do, then I strictly enjoin the use of the most general terms. It's the only way, the only way.'

'So you spoke to the superintendent in the most general terms?'

'My dear chap, you are almost as sharp as he is, almost.'

Mr Utamaro looked round the room.

'I have seen the superintendent, of course,' he said, 'and it turns out that he considers that I have an alibi. Has anyone else, I wonder?'

The six faces.

'I haven't,' Jim said.

A challenge.

'Nor I,' said Mr Applecheek.

From behind shelter.

'And you'll be delighted to hear I haven't either,' said Gerry.

A dig.

'I should be darned glad if I had,' Alasdair said.

A counterbalance.

'And I, like Mr Utamaro, appear to be an impossibility,' Honor said.

A simple statement.

'I'm afraid this was a point I found it necessary to disagree with the superintendent over,' said Miss Rohan.

'I hope he behaved like a gentleman,' Alasdair said.

'Oh yes, he was perfectly polite about it. But he made it plain that he refused to accept my word.'

'I hope you are going to tell us more,' Mr Applecheek said.
'I must have my curiosity satisfied, I am too old to be

patient.'

'I have nothing to conceal, Father,' said Miss Rohan. 'I told the superintendent that I was sitting on that little lawn round past the big one at the back of the house. My room looks out over it instead of the cedar lawn. I found it freer from interruptions there.'

'And someone knew you were there?' said Mr Applecheek. With eagerness.

'No, not exactly. But I understand those two girls, the Germans, were doing the bedrooms and were up and down the stairs all that part of the morning, so, in my view, I could not have left the lawn and gone upstairs unobserved. The superintendent didn't agree.'

'Deplorably legalistic, deplorably legalistic,' said Mr Applecheek. 'Even if he was right.'

He sank back in the battered armchair, and closed his eyes.

Mr Utamaro got up to carry his coffee cup, uncollected before, over to the table by the fireplace. As he passed Mr Applecheek he said quietly:

'About Miss Rohan.'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Applecheek.

He opened his eyes.

'You told me you think of her as a lady of the sort one seldom finds nowadays.'

'Yes?'

The old clergyman looked up quickly. A spark of hope.

'Remember this.'

Mr Utamaro leant a little closer and whispered:

'That is what is always said about people like Miss Rohan. Seldom found nowadays. I have met six of her in the few months I have been in England.'

Mr Utamaro put his cup on the table and went back to his chair.

'You're certainly lucky,' Alasdair said to Honor. 'I presume if you have really got this alibi you'll not have much more to do with our sharp little friend the superintendent.'

'You don't get on with him?' Honor said.

Alasdair helped himself to a peppermint from the box in his pocket.

'It isn't a question of getting on,' he said. 'He simply doesn't carry the necessary intellectual guns. I tried to explain to him something about Zen, and he told me it must be a lot of nonsense.'

'Was he rude?' said Miss Rohan.

'Well, I suppose not,' Alasdair said. 'I didn't quote his exact words. He was pleasant enough about it, if you want to know. But it was quite plain that that was what he meant.'

'You don't need all that much intellect in his job,' said Jim. 'You need enough common sense to match what you hear from one source against what you hear from another. That's all.'

'That may be all right for dealing with I.R.A. hooligans,' Alasdair said. 'But let me assure you in a matter like this you need some understanding.'

'Understanding nothing,' said Jim. 'You want just so much common sense plus a deal of will power.'

'Will power?' said Honor. 'That's an interesting notion.'

'Yes, will power,' Jim said. 'I ought to know. I've had a battle of wills with your man already.'

A sharp laugh from the clenched teeth.

'Yes,' Honor said, 'I think you've got something. And would you say the superintendent possesses the necessary will power?'

'He might,' Jim said.

'But I gather he hasn't been able to break down your iron resolve,' Alasdair said.

He got up and walked quickly across to one of the tall windows.

‘My conscience is clear,’ Jim said. ‘So I’m no easy nut to crack. But if it wasn’t I wouldn’t like to face that man with something to hide.’

Mr Applecheek slowly pulled himself out of his armchair.

‘All this talk about the superintendent has reminded me that I have a little matter to tell him,’ he said. ‘I think I had better go at once, otherwise I shall think of a reason for putting it off.’

He smiled round at them, and drifted out. At the door a vague gesture.

‘I expect he did the dirty deed in a fit of absent-mindedness,’ said Gerry. ‘It’s just come back to him.’

‘Mr Manvers, I don’t think it’s a matter for joking,’ Miss Rohan said.

‘I’d give up if I were you,’ Gerry said. ‘Every time I open my mouth I put my foot in it. You just pretend not to hear.’

‘My dear Mr Manvers, if one hears one hears. One cannot pretend that what is there is not there.’

‘No, indeed,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Under the bushy black eyebrows a twinkle.

‘All the same,’ Alasdair said, ‘I wonder what Mr Applecheek has got to say to the superintendent. Just what did he tell you, Mr Utamaro?’

‘We talked about Zen,’ Mr Utamaro said..

‘Hm. So, that can’t be it. He told us just now that he hadn’t got an alibi, didn’t he?’

‘My dear wife is the only one who has,’ Gerry said, ‘unless you count Miss Rohan.’

‘I think Mr Applecheek told me he was in his room during the period it – at the time in question,’ Miss Rohan said. ‘I would consider that an alibi.’

‘I was up in my room come to that,’ Jim said.

‘Gerry wasn’t in his room,’ Gerry said. ‘He was prowling about the garden with no one to look after him. So he would just have had time to pop in and – All right Miss R. I won’t say it, I won’t say it.’

‘So we come back to what Mr Applecheek is telling the superintendent,’ Alasdair said. ‘Just on the other side of that wall.’

He looked at the blank wall at the far end of the room. The faded paint of the panelling. A tracery of fine cracks.

The door opened tentatively. Mr Applecheek put his head round it. His long neck. The folds of loose skin.

‘Miss Rohan,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry to have to tell you the superintendent would like a word with you.’

Chapter 15

'In England,' said the blonde girl, 'even the police in the middle of a murder investigation observe scrupulously the laws of class distinctions. That is a fact which you would do well to note. It would fit in excellently when you write your general essay paper.'

'How do you know this?' the dark one said.

'Because when Superintendent Padbourne was in the middle of questioning me again about the times we had been cleaning the various students' rooms on the morning of the crime Mr Applecheek came in, and at once I was sent out.'

'But he is a pastor. It is the respect due to his cloth.'

'No. In England all clergymen are before anything, as they say, gentlemen. It was as a gentleman that he was given preference over me as a servant. Make a note of it.'

'All the same it is not certain.'

'Very well then. How do you account for this? I decided to wait outside the warden's office in case Mr Applecheek should be quick and the superintendent should want to continue asking me questions.'

'And you listened at the door? Oh, how could you? Anyone might have come out of the common room and seen you.'

'Pfui. This constant concern with respectability. It will hamper you gravely in life. Especially in getting a husband. And in any case what I was going to tell you has nothing to do with listening at doors.'

'I am sorry. I misjudged you. But you did once want to listen to what Mr Gerry was saying to Mr Utamaro.'

'Unfortunately the door of the warden's office is extremely thick.'

'Then you did listen.'

'But I didn't hear anything, so I could not have been doing wrong, could I?'

The dark girl's eyes clouded in thought.

'But the intention to do wrong existed,' she said. 'And it is, after all, the intention -'

'All right, all right. You must try and curb this passion for dialectics. It is worse than respectability.'

'I am sorry. But what in that case was it that gave you your theory of the English class system?'

'It is quite simple. As I expected, Mr Applecheek was with the superintendent for only a short time. But when he came out, was my interview resumed? It was not. Again the priority went to someone supposedly of a higher class. Miss Rohan was called in and I had to wait.'

'Miss Rohan? Then can it be that she has concealed something from the superintendent?'

'This is no time for idle speculation of that sort. We were discussing a serious question. Now, do you admit that my theory of English class structure is correct?'

'But perhaps Mr Applecheek told the superintendent something important about Miss Rohan and he had to question her about it at once.'

'Wrong,' said the blonde. 'She was only in there two minutes. Then at last it was the turn again of the lower orders. Now am I right?'

'It cannot have been an arrest or anything very grave if she was with the superintendent only two minutes. You must be correct. I will put the incident in my diary as an example of class consciousness. And there is another thing.'

‘Yes?’

The blonde hoisted herself on to the kitchen table and sat with her legs dangling.

‘I want your advice,’ said the dark one.

‘Certainly. What do you want advice about? Diet? You eat too many chocolates: that is why you have those spots.’

‘I have not got any spots. And besides this is an intellectual matter.’

‘Then you have come to the best possible person.’

The blonde thrust her left leg out and moved the foot to and fro to get the full effect of the slimness of her ankle.

‘It is this tea party this afternoon.’

‘Ah, the Japanese ceremonial tea. What about it?’

‘It is just this. Should I describe the ceremony in my diary? Does it count as a typical event of a stay in England?’

‘An excellent question. This will require some thought.’

She held up her right leg and examined its ankle.

Silence.

‘Well?’ said the dark one.

‘Yes. It is your duty to find out as much as possible of what happens at this ceremony. It illustrates the well-known links between England and Japan. I will help you. If they think they are absolutely in private they will certainly discuss the murder in very free terms.’

*

‘I think it’s an excellent idea,’ said Honor. ‘I’d very much like to see everybody together in a place where they think they are safe from observation. There might be some very interesting talk about the murder.’

‘Or about Zen,’ said Mr Utamaro.

They were walking side by side up and down the big lawn under the cedar of Lebanon. The grey sky.

‘You haven’t told the superintendent?’ she said.

'Oh, yes. I mentioned it.'

'A pity.'

'I told him because it is important that everybody at the ceremony should feel free from constraint. In Japan nowadays businessmen delight to attend such occasions. They take the chance of looking at themselves from a little distance. In the old days the ceremony was the favourite recreation of the samurai.'

'You don't need to dish out the tit-bits of information any more, by the way. The editor has agreed to drop the feature article in favour of the hard news story. I only wish he would do the same about this damned balloon story.'

'There is no such thing as height,' said Mr Utamaro. 'You cling deliberately to this distorted view of the world. These attempts to define things by saying they are either this or that, either high or low. Cease to do it, and heights will cease to exist for you.'

'Easily said. But you don't seem to understand. I've got my living to earn. I've got Gerry's living to earn too if it comes to that. I can't go in for Zen, even if I wanted to. It would make the only thing I'm trained to do become meaningless.'

She stopped walking abruptly and thrust her hand through her hair.

'You seem to forget that people are not always free agents. I'm bound to Gerry hand and foot. Don't you see that?'

'In Japan Zen monks often marry,' Mr Utamaro said.

He looked up at the sky.

'It may rain,' he said.

'I suppose it's possible to have an uncomplicated marriage,' Honor said.

She set off across the lawn again. At a fast pace.

'A loveless marriage,' she said.

A sharp laugh.

'That would be the ideal, after all.'

'You see that, that is a start,' said Mr Utamaro.

'All fine and dandy. Except that I'm incapable of not getting caught up the way I am with Gerry.'

'It is asking for trouble,' Mr Utamaro said. 'It is bad enough carrying about with us an image of ourselves and trying to fit into it at every moment. But to carry about an image of someone else and to try to fit them into it . . .'

He caught hold of Honor's arm. A surgeon's grip, firm but not fierce.

'Break out,' he said.

Honor shook her head.

'Too late,' she said. 'Much, much too late.'

They stood still. Mr Utamaro's hand on her elbow. Gentle. Implacable.

'You see pretty far into things,' she said.

'I have learnt not to see far into things but to see things as they are.'

'Including murder?'

Mr Utamaro let her arm drop and held out his palm.

'I felt a drop of rain,' he said.

'You mean to find out who killed Flaveen, don't you?' said Honor. 'I've known that ever since she died.'

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro, 'there is dust on the floor it must be swept up.'

Honor looked at him.

'I wonder if we are thinking of the same person?' she said.

'No, we aren't.'

'You're very sure.'

'I am sure of everything. Either I know a thing, or I do not. It is only when you add from your mind to what is put before you that you become uncertain. You wonder whether what you have added is right or wrong.'

Honor jerked round.

'Do you know who killed Flaveen?' she said.

'No,' said Mr Utamaro.

'You don't?'

'No. I have observed some things. There are certain facts. But I will have to see more before I know who killed Miss Mills. More facts may not be placed before me. Who knows?'

'I may place a fact or two before you sooner or later,' said Honor.

'We must go in. It is raining too much now,' Mr Utamaro said.

'Rain? I hadn't noticed.'

'Yet the drops fell on you. Your blouse is quite wet.'

'I was thinking of something else.'

'Thought makes you blind. It is best to see.'

They hurried round the side of the house and in at the wide front door. It began to rain hard. A steady downpour from a soft grey sky.

They stood looking at it from the shelter of the doorway.

'Yes,' said Honor, 'I think pretty soon the time will come. You say the superintendent knows about the tea ceremony?'

'Yes.'

'And you asked him if we need be disturbed?'

'I asked if it would be a convenient time.'

'And he said?'

'He said he could make no guarantee that his duties would not force him to see one or the other of us at that time.'

'A very typical remark. He seems to be a great one for his rights.'

'But he added that he didn't expect to need to see anyone again in the immediate future.'

'So we shall be on our own?'

'Most probably.'

‘Then perhaps you will find a few more facts that you may not know coming in front of you.’

*

Mr Utamaro left the lunch table. The second course, trifle again, was just being served. He walked along into the hall and out through the front door. Rapidly but without haste.

As he went through the hall the grandfather clock in its dark corner struck five. Its hands pointed to two minutes before a quarter past one.

Mr Utamaro smiled.

It was still raining. Steadily but not hard. The leaves of the trees glistened damply. Water trickled down the walls of the house, running, hesitating, running on again till it reached the ground and soaked away. The turf of the big lawn squelched slightly as Mr Utamaro walked across it. Only at the very heart of the huge cedar was there a small area of dryness.

Mr Utamaro crossed the lawn and went through a narrow archway on one side of it. A tangle of rose briars brushed his shoulders on either side. Through the arch a grass path led round to the back of the house.

The rain falling silently. The minute sound of the heavier drops coming off the projecting parts of the house and tapping faintly on the stonework below them. A blotched stain slowly darkening under one of the windows. The slosh of Mr Utamaro’s footsteps.

He went through a second rose-tangled archway and came out on to a small lawn backing on to a range of brick outbuildings. A few bedraggled creepers partly covered the walls. A narrow flower bed surrounded the lawn. It was filled with daffodils not quite out yet. The flowers hung heavily, pointing to the ground. Drops of rain ran over the pale yellow skins of their buds and launched themselves into the air.

In the middle of this lawn Mr Utamaro had erected a small hut. Incongruously Japanese. Its low pitched roof was made of straw thatch and its walls were of a thick greyish paper supported by light bamboo sticks. Mr Utamaro looked at it with anxiety. He glanced up to the unvarying leaden sky.

Then he entered and looked round the single room. Satisfied that the rain was not coming in he left and walked back along the grass path towards the cedar tree. His footsteps evenly squishing.

As he went through the archway on to the big lawn he heard an unexpected sound.

‘Psst’

He looked round.

Standing under the ineffective shelter of one of a clump of lilacs growing between the house and the archway was Superintendent Padbourne.

His hands thrust deep into the pockets of a trench coat. A green pork-pie hat protecting his head.

He held up a finger and beckoned to Mr Utamaro. Raindrops ran down his hand and into the warmth of his sleeve. He flicked them out, his mouth wrinkling with distaste.

Mr Utamaro turned back through the arch and made his way to where the superintendent was standing pushing through the interlaced branches of the overgrown lilacs. Their flower cones just showed faint purple.

The superintendent looked at him.

‘This damned rain doesn’t seem to worry you,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I suppose you’re above noticing such things.’

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘I feel the rain. But there are times when one goes out into it and times when one keeps dry.’

‘I saw you going out,’ the superintendent said, ‘so I took the opportunity to have a word with you while no one was about to see us. Matter of duty.’

He shook his head and shoulders vigorously. Heavy drops of rainwater whirled into the air.

‘It is best not to fight against it,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I dare say,’ Superintendent Padbourne said.

The corners of his mouth drooped gloomily.

‘What I wanted to know,’ he said, ‘was what Mrs Manvers – do you call her that, or do you call her Miss Brentt, I don’t know – wanted with you in such a hurry. Don’t tell me it was a talk about Zen.’

Mr Utamaro grinned. A flash of white teeth in the green gloom of the lilac thicket.

‘No,’ he said, ‘if we are to divide things up, this came into your department.’

‘I thought as much. That’s why I beat a retreat. I had a feeling she’d say things to you that she wouldn’t say to me. She thinks I’m a stupid policeman.’

‘And you think she’s a pestilential woman reporter,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It is better not to think like that at all’

‘That’s as may be,’ said the superintendent.

He jabbed his right hand at his collar, inserted a podgy finger and tried to scrape out the trickle of rain that had just penetrated. When he had convinced himself that it was hopeless, he hunched his shoulders again and said:

‘Well, what did she want?’

‘She wanted to tell me she knew who had killed “That girl”,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘But she didn’t of course give you a name?’

‘No.’

Mr Utamaro smiled.

‘I suppose,’ said the superintendent, ‘that she’ll come to me when she thinks she’s got proof and I’ll be expected to give her special facilities for her paper.’

‘That was what she told me she would do,’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘And do you think she does know?’

‘I cannot tell,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘She knows something that she thinks no one else does. I’m sure of that. But whether it is what we want to find out I don’t know. Tell me something.’

‘Oh, there’s things I can tell you, are there?’ said the superintendent.

He looked up at Mr Utamaro, making the water that had collected in his hat brim spill out on to his chin. He dabbed at it and hunched himself up again.

‘What exactly is Mrs Manvers’ alibi?’ said Mr Utamaro.

The superintendent risked another quick glance up at him. This time the piggy eyes were speculative.

‘I wondered whether she might not be worth looking into before the alibi came to light,’ he said. ‘I’ve had to leave her aside because it looks certain that she’s out of the question. But she’s impulsive all right and ruthless, in a way. She could kill someone, but I’m not sure that she’s at all the type for a premeditated business like this.’

‘She drives herself,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘But you can forget about her, or I’m a Dutchman. Just go over the facts. Miss Rohan saw the girl leaning out of an upstairs window at more or less exactly 12.27 p.m. She came in in a huff and happened to speak to you, and the subject of the time came up and provided a check. All right?’

‘I am not the person to point out flaws in logic,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘After all, I deny logic exists.’

‘Well, it does exist, you can take it from me,’ said the superintendent. ‘Now then, almost immediately you yourself set off from the house where the girl is still alive and you walk all the way up the garden to that little summer house right on the edge of the grounds. A ten-minute walk. And there you find Mrs Manvers. Had she just arrived after

running full pelt from the house round by some way you couldn't see her?'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro, 'she would have had to have taken a long route round and to have approached the summer house from the opposite direction to myself to have achieved that. And she was by no means puffing and panting or showing any signs of a long run.'

'Exactly,' said the superintendent. 'I've been over the ground myself. I've checked the time it takes to walk from the house. I've made sure that you can't approach the summer house except on foot. It couldn't be done.'

He peered up at Mr Utamaro with one questioning eye. And stooped to avoid the little dollop of rain slopping out of his hat brim.

'You must not expect me to perform a miracle for you,' Mr Utamaro said.

'You almost had me hoping you might,' said the superintendent. 'It was really Mrs Manvers you saw, wasn't it? Not her ghost, or her spirit manifestation or the idea of her or something?'

'Nothing of any of them,' said Mr Utamaro. 'I watched Mrs Manvers herself sitting in that little summer house, and then I talked with her.'

'And you talked with her just long enough to make it impossible for her to have got back to the house in time to commit the crime at the other end of the possible period,' the superintendent said. 'Even if we discount her husband's evidence that she was with him all the time until they came into the common room after lunch.'

He looked despondently at his sparkingly polished shoes. Mud spattered.

'I thought I might be on to something,' he said, 'when I heard that they gave different accounts of what they had been doing over the lunch period. But whatever they were doing it can't have been killing Flaveen Mills. At the very

latest according to the pathologist she was killed about the time they left you up at the summer house. They would have had to have gone a long way round to get back without you seeing them, and the quack won't agree to a time as late as that. Firm as a rock on it. The only interesting thing he did tell us is that the body was dropped from a height of a few feet after death. That's almost certainly the balcony in the library there. I'm pretty sure she was killed in her own room, which is just opposite the door to the gallery, and the murderer waited for a chance and nipped across with the body. They could have done it in two seconds. Not that all this gets us any forrader.'

He lifted one foot and moved it cautiously. A lump of soft earth came up with it.

'Damn,' he said.

'I think you had better watch the tea hut this afternoon from a distance,' Mr Utamaro said.

The superintendent looked more cheerful.

'You think there may be a scene?' he said.

In his eagerness he moved his head too vigorously. Rainwater splashed on to his face again. His hand came out of his trench coat pocket and he dabbed at himself with a handkerchief.

'Mrs Manvers seemed to promise a scene,' Mr Utamaro said. 'There is one small window overlooking the tea hut from the house at ground level. It belongs to the larder, I think.'

'All right,' said the superintendent. 'I hope something comes of it. Otherwise I'm getting nowhere fast. No one's got any sort of motive. That's the trouble. I thought about the old clergyman when he told me he took the sword. You knew about that, didn't you?'

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro.

'It might be a motive of a sort. The girl may have threatened to blackmail him. We know nothing about her:

it's possible. But what had she got to blackmail him over when you get down to it? I've just heard the result of an inquiry to his bishop – what they call a discreet inquiry: all ifs and ans – but what it amounted to was that the bishop knew all about him and so did everyone else who mattered.'

'Yes, he only pretended to deceive himself about how well his trouble was known,' Mr Utamaro said.

The superintendent screwed up his little pig eyes.

'Pretended to deceive himself? Well, yes, I dare say you're right. And who does that leave? Miss Rohan possibly. I could see her not needing a motive, being herself the madman that she and the reverend were so keen on. It's not impossible.'

'Has Mr Henderson been talking to you?' said Mr Utamaro.

'Oh, he thinks that, does he? He didn't mention it to me. But in any case I don't think it will wash. She wasn't in her own room, I know, because the girls cleaned it, and they were about on the stairs and what not. She tried to tell me she'd got an alibi. I wouldn't agree to that, but in point of fact if she wasn't sitting out on the lawn then where was she?'

'She was not on the lawn,' Mr Utamaro said.

'She wasn't? You're sure?'

'I was out of doors myself at that time. There was a very heavy shower. Heavier than this though not so prolonged.'

The superintendent held out his hand and let the heavy raindrops from the lilac leaves splash on to it.

'She showed no signs of having got wet, eh?' he said. 'She always seems to wear that same tweed costume. The weather was warm enough to sit out in that, and she's got a neat look about her. A few drops of rain would be very noticeable. Is that it?'

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Oh, blast,' said the superintendent, 'I do believe this infernal rain has gone through my coat.'

‘You will get dry soon.’

‘After I’ve caught my death of cold. Fat lot of good being dry will be then.’

He looked gloomily at the heavy clod of soil on his foot.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘things are looking up a bit, I must admit. There’s one other little thing I’ve got on to as well. Young Henderson may be very hoity-toity about his integrity and what not. But I’ve caught him out in one whopping good lie.’

A gleam in the piggy eyes.

‘He told me he was in his room at the time of the murder,’ he said. ‘But it so happens that I know that just wasn’t so.’

He pushed his hat recklessly up.

‘Those two German girls did out the room,’ he said. ‘He wasn’t there. I wonder just where he was?’

Chapter 16

'If we open this little window,' said the blonde girl, 'we shall be almost members of the tea party. I looked at it from the outside just now. There is a sheet of metal, perforated, on the other side. Quite excellent. We shall hear but be invisible. We have every right to be in the larder and the walls of the hut really are of paper, and they come only two yards away from the window.'

'But do you think we ought to listen?'

'Eavesdrop would be the better word. It conveys a definite suggestion of the reprehensible.'

'Reprehensible is *tadelnswert*'

'Exactly.'

'But you wouldn't want to do anything of that nature.'

'Here, catch hold of this and pull. The window hasn't been opened for years.'

Stifled grunts. The blonde girl swore.

'It's too hard,' said the dark one. 'It is a good thing. We aren't meant to get it open.'

'Pull.'

The plump arm and the lithe, pulling.

'You have not the will to succeed,' said the blonde. 'Pull with effort.'

'I am.'

'Pull harder. If you don't I will tell Mr Gerry you are ticklish.'

'But no. You mustn't. I -'

'Ah, at last. I told you that if you pulled with real effort it would open. Now, out of the way and let me see if they are

coming out.'

Silence.

'Can you see anything?' said the dark one.

'I can see the door of the hut. No one has come so far. But there may be someone inside. I can't hear anyone talking though.'

'What if someone should come in here?'

'Who is going to come in here? Be quiet I can't hear.'

Another silence.

The dark girl looking at the door. The wide larder shelves. Mostly stocked with tins. Some packets of butter and margarine on the bottom marble slab.

'Ah, here they come. All of them together. Mr Utamaro is showing them the way.'

The door of the larder opened quietly.

Superintendent Padbourne.

The dark girl's eyes widening and widening.

A faint smile on the ferociously well shaved upper lip. A glint in the piggy eyes.

'Now Mr Utamaro is ushering them into the hut Listen, you can hear every word.'

'But you won't,' said the superintendent.

The blonde screamed.

'Quiet, you little fool,' said Superintendent Padbourne.

'But -' she said.

The superintendent's lips closed in a firm line.

'Get out the pair of you,' he said. 'I'll want a word with you later.'

The dark one who had crept towards the door vanished in an instant.

'If we need some food from the larder ...' said the blonde.

'Don't you try any of that, my girl. Out.'

'Yes, sir.'

Hangdog.

*

Mr Utamaro stepped into the little hut behind his guests.

‘Welcome,’ he said, ‘to the Zen tea ceremony, the cha no yu. You see there is nothing mysterious about it. This bare simple hut, the tea house, the chaseki, dedicated to this single use. No furniture except a few tatami, as we call these mats, on the floor. No complications. The walls plain paper screens, shoji.’

‘One feels it is exquisitely bare,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Where are we going to sit?’ Gerry said.

Mr Utamaro grinned.

‘For this one afternoon you will have to make the effort to sit down without the aid of chairs, arm-rests, interior springing, horsehair padding or any of the complexities you are accustomed to. You will have to sit by itself.’

‘When I get back to civilization I’m going to start a brisk business exporting air cushions to Japan,’ Gerry said.

He lowered himself lopsidedly to the floor.

The others followed suit.

‘Naturally things will not be altogether as in Japan,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘But the great tea master Sen No Rikdu has declared that if one has only a kettle the ceremony can be carried out. So we can be as in former days when the samurai used to leave their swords outside the hut and rest from their anxieties in a mental atmosphere as empty as the hut itself. They gave themselves over to a simple ritual with simple objects, a matter requiring no thought. I think there is a sword we would do well to leave outside ourselves.’

Mr Applecheek, sprawling over a large area of the floor, said:

‘An excellent idea, my dear chap, a truly excellent idea. If impractical.’

‘Ah, why not?’ said Jim Henderson.

Knees together, drawn up. But not hugged.

‘Why not? Sure, hasn’t that damned sword taken up too much time already? There are other things in this world. For instance, I’d be glad to know whether that alcove is or is not a shrine.’

Mr Utamaro smiled.

‘Has the life which denies it is a religion gods after all?’ he said.

‘All right,’ said Jim, ‘put it that way if you want to.’

‘Then let me remind you,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘that Zen does not deny the existence of God. Neither does it affirm it. I spent a few days in Dublin on my way here and there I saw a public notice which seemed to me to be very good Zen. It read: The postmaster is neither obliged to give change nor authorized to refuse to do so.’

Jim grunted.

Mr Applecheek laughed.

‘I must work that into a sermon one day,’ he said. ‘A pity it illustrates your system rather than mine.’

Mr Utamaro left the hut and returned with a bundle of charcoal sticks. He put them ceremoniously into a small pit in the middle of the hut at the bottom of which was a pile of embers. He knelt and blew at them and soon they glowed red-hot.

Honor, who had sat down more easily than the others, swung to her feet.

‘What’s in this shrine?’ she said. ‘Or is it a shrine? I don’t know where the question was supposed to have been left.’

‘That is what it is,’ Mr Utamaro said.

He blew steadily at his little smokeless fire. The fresh charcoal caught.

‘Well, what’s there?’ said Honor.

‘What do you see?’

‘A scroll of whitish parchment, or something of the sort. With a picture of a bird on it in black ink. Done with a few

strokes only. And in front on a little shelf the vase you had the other day with a fresh piece of cherry blossom in it.'

'The other began to die,' said Mr Utamaro. 'You should use only perfect specimens.'

Honor dropped to the ground again.

'I suppose I'm to take that for an answer,' she said.

'What do you think, Mr Stuart?' said Mr Utamaro.

'Eh? I'm sorry, I wasn't listening,' Alasdair said.

'We were talking about the artistic arrangement of that alcove,' Honor said.

Alasdair looked up at it.

His heavy face redder than usual. Only the large fleshy nose standing out whitely.

'Very nice,' he said.

He dropped his head on to his knees.

'We should never have drunk all that water at lunch,' said Gerry. 'Bound to affect you.'

Alasdair looked up. Sharply.

'What do you mean?' he said.

'A joke,' said Gerry. 'J-O-K-E. Joke. You sawee?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Alasdair said.

'All right, all right. You asked you know.'

Alasdair looked down at the mat beneath him again, and said no more.

Mr Utamaro brought in a squat kettle made of iron and placed it over his fire.

'All the same,' said Jim, 'I'd like to get it clear what is the exact relation between Zen and Buddhism. You're a mite evasive on that.'

Squatting easily beside the kettle watching the first strands of steam rise up, Mr Utamaro said:

'Zen came out of Buddhism. Buddhism is there. To set out to destroy it or to reform it - as your Protestants reformed,

as they say, your Catholicism – that would be to become involved, to see it distortedly.’

‘Splendid, splendid,’ said Mr Applecheek.

He thrust his left leg suddenly forward and rubbed it.

‘Splendid, a discussion on religion. Such a pity the thought of that poor girl keeps obtruding.’

‘Does it?’ Jim said.

A quick turn of the head. Quick and angry.

‘If you were meaning,’ he said ‘to put in the black word against me because I liked Flaveen and am ready to leave her ghost alone, then come out and say it.’

Mr Applecheek held up his hands in a fan of astonishment.

‘My dear fellow, nothing was further from my mind. Indeed, how true that is. The girl was on my mind, and nothing else. In this atmosphere one emerges a little from one’s immediate preoccupations. And what does one find? The fact facing us. One of our number killed that child.’

Mr Utamaro got to his feet again. One easy movement.

He went out, leaving them sitting on the straw mats. A little uneasy.

‘If you ask me,’ said Alasdair, ‘leaving us facing the fact of Flaveen’s death was the precise idea.’

An unexpected voice.

‘All this stuff about laying aside our cares,’ he said. ‘You don’t think our Nip friend is as simple as that, do you?’

Bile.

‘But why, why are we talking like this?’ Miss Rohan said. She raised herself from the ground a little and adjusted her position.

‘Why are we talking like this?’ she went on. ‘What Mr Utamaro said was so right. We ought to forget all that, at least for a little. We are entitled to some peace.’

Mr Utamaro came in again. He was carrying a plate with a dozen little pale cakes on it, under it were two large bowls, one in the other. He put them on the floor and went out again. Almost at once he came back in. This time he carried a small black lacquered box, a bamboo whisk and a bamboo ladle.

They watched him in silence.

'What is a wall?' he said.

Nobody attempted to answer.

'A wall is a piece of paper,' Mr Utamaro answered himself.

'All right,' said Alasdair.

Rising temper.

'All right, so you heard what I said. Well, I don't take it back, any of it. I think you invented this ghastly sham tea party to lull us into a sense of security so that you could work some big psychological trick. And I don't think that's very funny.'

'Why should you mind being lulled, Mr Stuart?' said Honor.

She stretched out on the floor, propping herself up on one elbow. At ease.

'What do you mean?' Alasdair said.

Honor smiled. Toothpaste smile.

'Surely,' she said, 'the only one of us who ought to have any objections to being lulled into a false sense of security is the one who killed Flaveen.'

She looked at Alasdair. Unswerving eyes.

'That's not it at all,' said Alasdair. 'It's simply utter nonsense to suppose I killed the girl. I'd scarcely even spoken to her. It's just that I happen to object to being taken for a ride by anyone, no matter what mistaken ideas they've got.'

'And they are mistaken?' said Honor.

Unnaturally still.

'Of course.'

'You've nothing to hide?'

'Nothing whatsoever.'

'I see.'

She smiled again.

And turned away. A spark of malice in her eyes.

'I don't think the mere fact that someone scarcely spoke to Flaveen while she was here is proof of innocence at all,' Jim said.

The flat Ulster voice.

'I don't think many of us spoke to her a great deal,' Miss Rohan said. 'You seemed to be the most friendly towards her, Mr Henderson.'

Jim turned his head and looked at her full in the face.

'I was friendly,' he said. 'I happen not to be weighed down with a lot of old class prejudices. So there was no reason why I shouldn't speak to her. It was obvious enough there were some who weren't going to if they could help it.'

'I scarcely spoke to her,' Mr Applecheek said.

The cracked voice of age. An interposition.

'I knew I ought to have done,' he said. 'The Church is out of touch with Youth nowadays. The papers say so. But for the life of me I couldn't think what to talk to her about.'

He sighed.

'There is something called rock and roll,' he said, 'but I don't know what it is.'

'Good old padre,' said Gerry. 'Make a joke of it. Always a cheerful word.'

'Only it isn't a joking matter,' said Honor. 'Is it, Mr Utamaro?'

Mr Utamaro watching the squat iron kettle, blowing occasionally at the charcoal fire. Without haste, without a deadline. With care.

'Death is a joke,' he said.

‘But I rather think it’s a joke you take pretty seriously,’ Honor said.

A request. A reaction sought.

‘Ah,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘The water is boiling. Quiet now, and listen to the kettle singing. There are a few small pieces of metal in it. They make a little musical noise in the boiling water. A poet has compared it to the sound of a waterfall muffled by clouds.’

Nobody spoke.

The faint hiss of the fast rising steam and the tinkle of the metal in the kettle.

Mr Applecheek cautiously stretched out his right leg. Nobody else moved.

An intermittent high pitched note came from the kettle, rising a little, falling a little. The varying pressure of the steam.

Everybody listened.

Mr Utamaro opened the black lacquered box and using the bamboo ladle spooned out some dark greenish powder and put it into the smaller of the two bowls. He then used the ladle to spoon boiling water from the kettle on to the powder.

A warm fragrance.

Mr Utamaro picked up the bamboo whisk, a simple stick with one end delicately cut into tendril splays, and vigorously worked at the tea.

‘A Chinese writer tells us that it should be a froth of liquid jade,’ he said.

‘It is certainly very interesting,’ Miss Rohan said.

Doubtful.

‘The ancient ceremonials of the east,’ said Mr Applecheek.

‘That green powder, was that the tea?’ Jim said.

‘It was,’ Mr Utamaro said.

'I don't like to think what a Belfast docker's wife would say about it.'

'Your British tea would provoke unusual comments in Japan,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Here,' said Gerry, 'no cups?'

'It is customary to drink from the same bowl,' Mr Utamaro said.

'What a Naafi,' said Gerry.

'Are you looking forward to this strange brew, Mr Stuart?' said Honor.

'I'm perfectly prepared to try it,' Alasdair said. 'I pride myself on being not unadventurous in the matter of food.'

'Are we right to talk?' Miss Rohan said. 'Ought the ceremony to be carried out in silence?'

'No,' said Mr Utamaro, 'it induces friendly conversation.'

'That's pure tea, is it?' Jim said. 'There's no question of the plant in that state containing any drug or anything?'

'Have no fear,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Its effects are the same made this way as they are when good black tea is poured from a much used chipped enamel teapot. It is simply a reviving beverage. Do you know how the plant originated?'

'It originated the way all other plants do,' said Jim. 'By the process of evolution.'

'Quite wrong,' Mr Utamaro said. 'I will tell you what happened. One day Bodhidharma, the man who brought Zen to China from India, fell asleep while he was meditating. He was so angry when he woke that he cut off his eyelids and dropped them on the ground, and at once they took root and grew into the first tea bushes. Isn't that a more likely account than your evolution, Mr Henderson?'

With a sly grin he took the tea bowl and placed it in front of Miss Rohan.

'Do I drink?' she said.

‘You should take three sips,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘And I would be honoured if you would look at the bowl. It is quite a simple one, as you see. Only a rough finish with the glaze allowed to run, but there is something of interest in the shape it has formed, is there not?’

Miss Rohan looked at the bowl.

‘Why, yes, there is,’ she said.

‘A controlled accident,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘Intentionless intention. That is what your artist niece is trying to attain.’

‘Most interesting,’ Miss Rohan said.

She picked up the bowl and took three cautious sips.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

She smiled a tight smile. Mr Utamaro put the bowl in front of Honor. Honor sipped.

‘Very nice,’ she said. ‘It really is. Can you get this tea in London, Mr Utamaro? It might make an interesting idea for the paper. We could build it up into a big gimmick. It’s certainly got something.’

‘There, she goes,’ said Gerry. ‘Getting excited over a tea party. She’s barmy. Tea gets her all wound up and drink leaves her flat. Look at her the other night. Sunday. What a wet blanket.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘What do you mean “Oh dear”?’ Gerry said. ‘I’ve told you: you have to put up with us. Private life lived in public. Always has been.’

‘No, it wasn’t that,’ Miss Rohan said.

Quickly. A wave of embarrassment.

‘It was that party. The thought of it brought it all back to me.’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ said Gerry. ‘You don’t want to be morbid. Look, Flaveen enjoyed herself then, didn’t she? It was probably the last good time she had. What’s wrong with that? Nothing to weep buckets over.’

'It reminded me of the last time I saw her said Miss Rohan.

Starchily.

Mr Utamaro put the tea bowl in front of Mr Applecheek. He sipped carefully.

'They tell me it was the last time anyone saw the poor creature alive,' Miss Rohan said. 'I wish it could have been a happier memory. Blowing one of those nasty things out of the window at me. And yet, do you know, somehow I felt her heart wasn't in it. As if, perhaps, subconsciously she knew. She just blew the thing two or three times, only about half way out. Poor girl. I do believe we may be granted some sort of intimation, you know.'

She looked across the little hut at Mr Applecheek.

'Can one have another go?' Mr Applecheek said to Mr Utamaro, tapping the side of the tea bowl.

'Certainly,' said Mr Utamaro, 'there is plenty.'

'Since we seem to have got back to the old subject,' said Honor, 'there is something I want to ask.'

She scrambled up and stood looking down at them. Her head not far from the light rafter holding up the thatched roof.

'Mr Stuart,' she said, 'you told us just now you had nothing to hide.'

Alasdair looked up at her.

'What is this?' he said.

'Have you got anything to hide?' said Honor.

An edge to her voice.

Mr Applecheek put down the tea bowl rather quickly.

'Of course I haven't got anything to hide,' Alasdair said. 'Why should I have?'

He heaved himself into a position where he could get up more easily.

‘If you had anything to hide,’ Honor said, ‘there would be one simple explanation. That you were hiding the fact that you knew Flaveen better than you make out and that you killed her.’

For an instant she took her eyes off him. She glanced at Mr Utamaro. Squatting easily on the floor beside Mr Applecheek’s sprawl.

Mr Utamaro looked up at her. Without expression. The eyes under the projecting black eyebrows calmly appraising.

‘Am I right?’ said Honor.

‘Are you accusing me of murder?’ Alasdair said.

He heaved himself to his feet.

‘I’m accusing you of lying,’ Honor said.

‘Lying?’

‘Yes.’

‘What am I supposed to have lied about? This is ridiculous.’

‘Chess,’ said Honor.

There was a moment of silence.

‘I thought,’ said Mr Applecheek, ‘that she said chess.’

‘I did say chess,’ Honor said. ‘Well, Mr Stuart?’

‘I don’t understand you.’

But the note of confidence gone.

‘No? Come, what must the word chess mean to you?’

No answer.

‘Not the time you played for Oxford?’ Honor said. ‘And were given your half-blue for it? Surely you would think of that: you spoke about it proudly enough the other night. Only as it so happens Oxford doesn’t award half-blues for chess. Cambridge does. There’s a big two-column story about it once a year in the fuddy-duddy Press. I remember things like that.’

‘Did I say I’d been given a half-blue?’ said Alasdair. ‘What could I have been thinking of? I must have –’

‘Oh, stop it,’ said Honor.

She walked across the hut to stand nearer to him. Picking her way through the jutting legs.

‘Don’t think you can talk your way out of this one,’ she said. ‘That was a plain lie. What have you got to hide, Mr Stuart?’

Alasdair’s white face. The heavy line of the jaw flabby, the large aquiline nose shining with sweat.

‘Come on,’ Honor said, ‘just who are you? Underneath that big bogus background, what is there? The man who knew Flaveen Mills, of course. That’s obvious. But what else? You might as well tell us. The game’s up.’

Around the two figures standing facing each other silently the others scrambled one by one to their feet.

Only Mr Utamaro sat on.

Honor took her eyes off Alasdair’s blood drained face and looked down at the Japanese.

Mr Utamaro looked contemplatively at the tea bowl beside him.

Honor frowned.

She turned back to Alasdair.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘we’re going to find out your squalid little secret, and you needn’t think we aren’t. Out with it.’

Alasdair looked round. Rapidly. The hunted beast.

The others looked at him. Magnetic attraction.

Nobody spoke.

The tiny hut full of people, their heads nearly touching the slim rafters. A crowd. The little charcoal fire glowing in its pit. The neglected tea things. The forgotten ceremonial. The charged atmosphere. Suddenly hot. Oppressive.

Alasdair looked from side to side again.

Mr Utamaro stood up. The lithe movement. Almost unnoticed.

‘We’re waiting,’ said Honor.

'No.'

Alasdair's shout. A denial. Illogical, absolute, hysterical.

He swung round on his heel, balanced for a moment on tiptoe, and launched himself through the thin paper walls of the hut.

The tearing, tangling paper.

Alasdair flung it aside, kicking it clear of his legs, staggering to his feet.

Mr Utamaro slipped across the hut as it sagged under the impact of Alasdair's attack. Finding a path for his wide shoulders through the thicket of jostling elbows and arms without hesitation. He slid out of the door.

Alasdair looked round the lawn. Unfamiliar territory. He spotted the only way out, the rose-tangled archway.

And Mr Utamaro almost there.

Running, but without effort. A roller skater.

Alasdair ran too, but by the time he had crossed the small stretch of lawn Mr Utamaro was standing quietly a yard in front of the archway facing him. Feet a little apart, firmly planted on the ground, knees slightly bent. At ease.

'Get out of my way,' Alasdair shouted.

His black hair falling in long strands over his face, breathing heavily.

'It would be better not to go,' said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair's white face suddenly flushed a dull, dark, heavy red.

'I'm getting to hell out of here,' he said, 'and no one's going to stop me.'

The others making their way out of the ruins of the hut.

Alasdair turned for a moment and looked at them.

The pursuers.

He turned back to face Mr Utamaro, put his head down and charged.

The heavy body hurtling forward.

A slight movement from the squat figure in the black kimono.

Alasdair lay on his back on the damp grass of the little lawn with Mr Utamaro looking passively down at him.

Chapter 17

'In Judo,' said Mr Utamaro, 'life has to be lived the Zen way. It insists on action without thought. It casts off the shackles of logic which tell us that a force directed towards one necessarily must strike. A force is only a force: it can go in any direction.'

'Is that what happened?' said Alasdair.

He looked up into the sky. The grey cloud was breaking up into large masses and through them the soft blue could be seen.

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro, 'that is what happened. It is a principle you should have realized. You were being attacked a few minutes ago but you were not bound to be felled.'

'Perhaps you're right,' Alasdair said. 'But all the same I don't see what I could have done.'

He swept his left hand, palm down, over the cool damp grass.

'You shouldn't lie there like that, Mr Stuart,' said Miss Rohan. 'The lawn is distinctly wet.'

Alasdair sat up.

'I suppose it is,' he said. 'But it was comfortable.'

He knelt forward and lunged up.

'And I have a feeling that I ought to take what comfort I can get.'

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro, 'you are going to have an uncomfortable few minutes. But it will be worth it.'

'All right,' said Alasdair.

He looked at the others, standing in a semicircle on the wet grass.

'Well,' he said, 'of course I never played chess for Oxford. I don't really know what made me say I did. But I'm always doing things like that. I can't resist the chance to appear in a good light. I was at Oxford, though, really I was.'

The small boy sincerity.

'I don't know a great deal about British life,' said Mr Utamaro, 'but I am right, am I not, in thinking that Alasdair Stuart as a name is a bit too good to be true?'

'Yes,' said Alasdair, 'that was my parents' doing. They began it all and they were not very subtle. I've learnt a lot since then - though every now and again I forget some tiny inconvenient fact, like that business of chess half-blues.'

'You'll have to explain to me,' Gerry said. 'I don't know a half-blue from a half-breed.'

'It's quite simple,' Alasdair said.

A hint of the old lecturing manner.

'My parents were named Schneider. They came to England from Germany in 1933. They were Jews, of course, although they never practised their religion. And from the moment they arrived in England they were determined that we all were to become as English as possible, but especially me. So they changed their name, choosing, I don't really know why, as Scottish a one as they could. It was probably that they had read Scott as children, I don't know.'

'You're a Jew, of course,' said Gerry.

Sudden enlightenment.

'I don't know why I missed it. Come to look at you, it's obvious. Hooked nose - or what they call aquiline - the lot.'

'Some of my best friends are Jews,' said Miss Rohan.

'Yes,' Alasdair said, 'my poor parents - they are both dead now - couldn't change my physical appearance. But I found that if I dressed and acted the part they had cast me for very few people noticed the actual physical signs of my race. But you were one of the few, weren't you, Mr Utamaro?'

'I was, Mr Utamaro said.' I see what is there. But I have had little experience of Europe and was never really sure.'

'Well,' Alasdair said, 'that's about all there is to it. That's what I was hiding. I never met Flaveen till last Sunday.'

A careless half shrug.

'I am a pretender,' he went on. 'I have been all my life. I have devoted my best energies to plunging into the English atmosphere. Sometimes I find myself really thinking like an Englishman, but at other times I wonder if I can go on.'

'It would be easier to hit your target if it were really there,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Really there?'

'Yes, all these perfect Englishmen, or perfect Scots, you set out to copy, they are only copying each other or some ideal figure. They don't really exist. Each one of them is only a person. You can never be exactly what you think they are, because they are not that at all.'

'Yes, I suppose so. I knew that really,' Alasdair said. 'Only I wouldn't let myself think about it.'

He shook his head from side to side. Emerging from a fast flowing river.

'I'm going up to my room now,' he said. 'I'll see you all later on.'

Mr Utamaro stepped aside to let Alasdair go through the archway. A rose briar caught at the sleeve of his tweedy jacket.

*

The dining room. The bare trestle tables, white and scrubbed. On all but one of them the chairs up-ended, eight to a table. On parade.

The walls, two hundred years old. Mute witnesses of changing times. Never glowing to candlelight now. Three large unshaded bulbs hanging from the ceiling. A harsh

light. Through the tall curtainless windows the last of the day. Giving up the ghost.

At the one occupied table, the one nearest the door to the kitchens, sat the students at the course (one week) on Zen Buddhism. Their instructor (and temporary warden, in the absence of Major Francis on annual leave) was at the head of the table.

Mr Utamaro. Wearing this evening European clothes. A blue suit, rather bright with a thin white stripe. Ready-made, too small across the shoulders, too slack at the stomach. A khaki shirt and a blue cloth tie.

A guy.

But the eyes under the jutting black eyebrows commanding. Completely devoid of restlessness, but moving from point to point seeing what was to be seen. The shaven bullet head with the two sprouts of coarse black hair was set at an angle. Inquiring, yet in repose.

At the six students of the course. Miss Rohan on Mr Utamaro's right. Opposite her Honor. Next to Honor Mr Applecheek, sitting facing Alasdair. And at the end of the table Gerry next to Alasdair and Jim next to Mr Applecheek.

The first course of dinner. Shepherd's pie.

Little conversation.

'Could you pass the salt, please?'

'Thank you.'

'I wonder if I could trouble you for the water.'

'Thank you so much.'

'More peas?'

'No thank you. I'm afraid I don't much care for them.'

'No, neither did I. But one mustn't grumble.'

'No.'

Mr Utamaro put down his fork.

'There is no making of decisions,' he said.

They all turned to look at him. Nobody went on eating.

‘That is what you must learn to avoid,’ Mr Utamaro went on. ‘AH this business of making up your minds. All this asking yourselves: should I do it now? Should I do it this way? Ought I to do it? It is all wrong.’

‘Except that the Christian religion enjoins us to do just that,’ said Mr Applecheek.

‘For instance,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘although I know who killed Flaveen Mills, I do not torture myself with trying to decide whether I ought to say what I know. A time will come. Or it will not come.’

Six pairs of eyes looking at him. Six people holding their breath.

‘Did I understand that you are deliberately withholding some – some knowledge that has come to you about this murder?’ said Miss Rohan.

Outraged.

‘I am not withholding anything,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘To withhold something means that a decision has been taken not to disclose it. That is what I was warning you against. What you have got to aim at is not taking decisions. Not working at things with your minds.’

‘Admirable, admirable.’

Mr Applecheek softly clapped his hands together.

‘I wouldn’t have hoped for anything as good,’ he said. ‘A murder committed, the murderer discovered, and because the person who has made the discovery has subjected his mind to a series of mystical eastern disciplines he is perfectly happy to have this knowledge and do nothing about it. Charming, amazing, delightful. And who will tell Superintendent Padbourne?’

‘I won’t for one,’ Gerry said. ‘I may be a wicked lad, but at least I’m fly. How do we know that he knows? He probably knows damn all.’

He jerked his head in Mr Utamaro’s direction.

Mr Utamaro ate a mouthful of shepherd’s pie.

‘What is it exactly that you do know?’ said Honor.

Wary. Waiting to pounce.

‘I know who committed the murder and why,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘And have you got proof?’

‘What is proof?’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘A concoction of logic. No, I haven’t got proof.’

‘Then I don’t think we need be too disturbed,’ said Honor.

‘I did not ask you to be disturbed,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘In fact, I try to teach you not to be disturbed. That I know who killed Flaveen Mills makes no difference to anything. The murder has still been committed. The one who did it did do it, and what I know makes no difference to that. But, you know, it is no mere supposition I am indulging in. I am able to relate in broad outline just what happened from start to finish.’

Alasdair leant forward.

‘Has it occurred to you,’ he said, ‘that by telling us this you have put yourself in danger?’

‘Because the murderer may try to kill me to stop me telling what I know?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Exactly.’

‘But that is not important. I am indifferent to this question of killing – whether I am to be killed, or whether Flaveen Mills was killed. You must learn to detach yourself from that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, splendid,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Here we are at the very crux of a logical matter, at the point where the question arises of convincing a jury by logic that a certain event has happened, and what do we find? A complete denial that logic exists. Splendid beyond belief. And there is still the prospect of Superintendent Padbourne.’

‘It’s not exactly anything to be pleased about,’ said Jim from the far end of the table.

Words from between clenched teeth.

‘But you’re quite right for the matter of that,’ he went on. ‘He has us in a cleft stick. What do words like justice, or even revenge, mean to him? There’s no way round at all.’

‘There are one or two things that have happened which are still unexplained,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘But they make no difference.’

Mr Applecheek clapped his hands gently together again.

‘If everyone has finished their pie I will ring for the next course,’ Mr Utamaro said.

The door from the kitchens opened at once and the blonde German girl came in with a tray of pudding plates.

Tinned plums and custard.

*

‘I understand you want to see me,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘Yes, please come in,’ Mr Utamaro said.

He got up from the plain kitchen chair in his small room with the high ceiling.

‘One moment,’ he said, ‘they have taken my second chair out. I will fetch it again.’

He left the door open and walked quickly along the corridor to the meditation hall.

Miss Rohan looked round his room.

The single electric light bulb was burning. The broad panes in the narrow window reflected the tight pattern of the wallpaper and the emptiness of the room.

Miss Rohan walked across to the window and stared out. In the light coming from behind her the thick mass of the cedar of Lebanon could just be made out. A wind had sprung up and its branches were tossing up and down restlessly. Miss Rohan shivered slightly.

Mr Utamaro came back in carrying a second chair.

‘You are used to something more comfortable,’ he said.

'It doesn't matter,' Miss Rohan said.

'You should not be indifferent all the same. When you sit you should sit with the whole self.'

Miss Rohan sat on the second kitchen chair.

'I'm afraid my mind is elsewhere,' she said. 'What did you want to see me about?'

'I wanted to ask you a question.'

She looked up at him sharply.

Mr Utamaro sat down opposite her.

'Well?' she said.

'I wanted to ask you why you have been lying about where you were at the time of the murder.'

'Why should you think I lied?' Miss Rohan said.

No indignation. Unrational hope.

'You did not sit outside at that time as you told us you had done,' Mr Utamaro said. 'You forgot, I think, that there was an unusually sharp and heavy shower just then. I took shelter on my way back from the summer house at the top of the grounds but in spite of that I got quite wet. At lunchtime you were perfectly dry while I was still wet. Yet you were wearing exactly the same clothes as when I had seen you earlier.'

'A shower,' said Miss Rohan. 'A heavy shower. I never even noticed it. But then I wouldn't have done.'

'Because you were indoors. But the rain must have made a noise on the windows. What other reason did you have for not noticing it at all?'

In the little room the sound of the cedar branches threshing in the wind could be plainly heard. Mr Utamaro sat without the slightest movement. Miss Rohan opposite him sat still too. But twice she opened her mouth as if she was going to say something. The sound of her breathing was plainly audible.

At last she spoke.

'I don't want to tell you,' she said.

'There is nothing to compel you,' Mr Utamaro said, 'but I think you will tell me.'

'Oh dear,' said Miss Rohan.

A tear ran down her cheek. She quickly took out a handkerchief, white with a broderie anglaise edge, and wiped it away.

She hung her head.

'It was that book Mr Manvers talked about,' she said. 'The one about Indian sculpture. The erotic sculptures. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I was like a schoolgirl.'

The muttered confession.

'Oh, why does one do such things?' she went on. 'I was upset by that girl, she flaunted herself.'

Miss Rohan raised her head and looked directly at Mr Utamaro.

'Oh no,' she said. 'I'm still making excuses for myself. And there are none.'

Mr Utamaro sitting impassively.

'I went up to my room,' Miss Rohan went on, 'and on my way I noticed that the door of Mr and Mrs Manvers' room was ajar. I stood in my room and thought "It would be perfectly easy to slip in there and see if he really has got that book, I must know whether it exists." And that's what I did. And, yes, the book does exist.'

She paused a moment and then said:

'It was because I was looking at it that I didn't notice the rain. And then when I got back to my own room I found the girls had been in and tidied it up. So later when we were all questioned about our whereabouts at just that time I had to say I was outside. I thought it was pretty safe to pick on that secluded lawn. I can see it from my window and I didn't think anybody had been there. But I had no idea about the rain.'

Mr Utamaro looked across at her. His unchanged expression.

‘And that was what you did?’ he said.

‘It was,’ said Miss Rohan. ‘You don’t think I did anything else, do you? You don’t think I killed that girl. Oh, I’ve thought about my responsibility over it. I’ve even asked myself whether I could have killed her without realizing what I was doing.’

She stood up.

‘But I didn’t, you know,’ she said. ‘I may at times be at the mercy of thoughts I believed I would never have to own to, but I do retain some self-control. I did not kill Flaveen Mills.’

Without looking at Mr Utamaro to see the effect of her words she opened the door and went out.

*

It took Mr Utamaro a quarter of an hour to find Jim Henderson. The others were spending the evening in the common room, but none of them knew where Jim was. Mr Utamaro found him in the library. The meditation hall. The scene of the crime.

‘Good evening,’ he said, ‘I was looking for you.’

Jim, who was sitting on one of the canvas chairs that were the sole furniture of the room, glanced up from his book.

‘I came in here because I wanted to work,’ he said. ‘That damned chatter gets me irritated.’

‘And you find you can work here?’ Mr Utamaro asked.

Jim grinned.

‘I don’t to tell you the truth,’ he said. ‘I’ve been trying until I’m nearly destroyed with it, but I don’t get very far.’

‘If you have locked yourself in a rigid strait-jacket over her death, you cannot expect to be comfortable,’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘Just what do you know?’ said Jim.

'I know who killed Flaveen Mills and what their reasons were,' Mr Utamaro said.

Jim looked speculative.

'Surely,' he said, 'you don't think that just because you've caught someone out in a lie that they killed her?'

Mr Utamaro grinned.

'Every one of you has told lies,' he said. 'If that was the only sign I had, any one of you could be the murderer. For instance, where were you at the time Miss Mills was killed?'

'I've told the superintendent, and no doubt he's told you that's so friendly with him, that I was in my room.'

Jim looked at Mr Utamaro steadily.

'Sitting so quietly that the two girls who came in to clean never saw you?' Mr Utamaro said.

Jim's book shut with a slam.

'They went into my room?'

'Yes.'

'I never thought of that.'

'You are not much used to telling direct lies.'

Jim frowned quickly.

'I'm not much used to telling lies of any sort,' he said.

'But you are used to acting them,' Mr Utamaro said.

'What do you mean?'

'That you live to a pattern, an attitude. It is bound to involve you with disputes with yourself as you really are. The ideal of integrity is something which doesn't fit human behaviour. That is why you got yourself into this mess.'

'Maybe it is. But now I'm in it I'm going to stay there.'

'What were you doing at the time of the murder?' said Mr Utamaro.

'I refuse to say.'

'I am giving you a chance of telling me.'

'And I'm not taking it. You can tell that to your friend the superintendent. Let him arrest me if he wants. What I was

doing then is my own business, and it's staying that way.'

Chapter 18

‘But how will I tell my parents?’ said the dark girl.

A wail.

‘You will not have to tell your parents. Either the superintendent will carry out his threat and get in touch with them or he was only trying to frighten us. In the first case your parents will get to know of your shocking behaviour without you telling them, and in the second case all we have to do is to keep our nerve and say nothing.’

‘But if he does write to them?’

‘He writes to them, and they order us home at once.’

A shrug.

‘And what about my chances in the exam? Unless I stay here the whole time I will not pass. I know I will not. It is different for you, you are so clever.’

‘Oh, do be quiet. Do you think I want to go home? Just as Mr Gerry is getting interested. He jumped on me as I was walking along the corridor after dinner.’

‘Oh, how awful.’

‘It was very nice.’

‘And what did he – what did he do?’

The blonde one sighed and held out her hands wide.

‘He only said “Goodnight, kiddo”,’ she said.

‘I shall be glad when he has gone. With me all the time he wants to do more than say “Goodnight, kiddo”.’

The blonde girl sat heavily on her bed. She put her chin in her hands.

‘I love him,’ she said. ‘That’s the truth.’

'But he may be a murderer.'

'I think he is. It is so romantic'

'You think he is the one?'

'Yes.'

A deep sigh.

'But how do you know? Have you found out something?'

'No. But he is such a liar.'

'Aren't you ever going to finish getting ready for bed? I want to put the light out. We have to be up early, you know.'

'Oh, put the light out. I will go along to the bathroom wearing only my pyjamas. Perhaps I will meet Mr Gerry.'

*

'I will let you out, superintendent,' said Mr Utamaro. 'Major Francis, the warden, asked me always to make sure the main door was locked after ten o'clock. I think I have forgotten to do it, but I may have remembered.'

'After ten?'

The superintendent looked sharply at Mr Utamaro as they walked along together towards the hall.

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'Major Francis thinks that a door is the way into a house,' he said. 'There must be at least fifty windows here.'

'Any one of which could have been easily opened in the middle of the night by whoever found out where Mr Applecheek put the sword after he had stolen it.'

'Exactly, superintendent.'

Mr Utamaro found that the heavy front door was locked. He took a key from under the doormat, unlocked it and swung it open.

The superintendent glanced round the darkened hall, and said:

'Step out with me a moment, would you? It's quite a fine night and I want a few words with you.'

They went out and stood on the wide steps leading down to the roughly gravelled drive. Mr Utamaro pulled the door to behind them. The superintendent looked up. The house above them was black and silent.

‘Have they gone to bed?’ he said.

‘I think so,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Not that I’ve any great secrets to tell you,’ the superintendent said. ‘But I prefer people not to know my business.’

They stood in silence. The sky was dark blue and starry. A ragged cloud hurried across it. There was no moon. The wind had dropped a little. It came now only in fitful bursts making the invisible bushes protest every now and again before falling into silence.

‘If I only knew who the hell the girl was,’ said the superintendent. ‘But there’s no sign of a clue. Not a letter in her luggage, not an item of clothing marked with initials. One laundry mark: a big place in north-west London with thousands of customers. We traced it back to a woman who keeps cheap digs. But she took over the place eighteen months ago when the former landlady died and all the lodgers were new-comers.’

‘You have been busy,’ Mr Utamaro said.

‘There’s a lot of work in it,’ said the superintendent, ‘but it hasn’t got us anywhere. And we’re nearly through. Nothing on the sword. It was wiped clean of finger-prints. Nothing more from the post mortem. The blow wasn’t particularly well aimed but it must have killed her very quickly, and she wasn’t pregnant or anything. That’s all.’

‘And what else have you been doing?’

‘We’ve been into the backgrounds of all these people. They’re all what they say they are, as far as we can see. That chap Stuart was born Schneider and was a German, but there’s nothing to that.’

‘He told us,’ said Mr Utamaro.

'Did he? I thought he would have killed to keep it quiet. They generally do.'

'It came out.'

'I see. And has anything else come out?'

'Yes. Miss Rohan told me she was in the Manvers' bedroom when she was meant to be sitting out on the back lawn.'

'What was she doing in there, of all places?' said the superintendent.

'She was prying,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Oh, like that, eh? This makes a bit of difference. I thought she couldn't have got upstairs because those German girls were about. But if she was upstairs all along ... Now, if we can find a link between her and Flaveen we will be beginning to see daylight.'

'But so far as you know there is no link?'

'None at all.'

'Then you have simply added one more to your list of suspects.'

'Yes. It means a wider field to work on, but that increases our chance of hitting on something. We may pick up one of the former lodgers at that boarding house and get on to who the girl was that way. There's still hope.'

The superintendent stared into the darkness.

'You've nothing more to tell me, I suppose?' he said.

'I have nothing to tell you,' said Mr Utamaro.

Without hesitation.

*

Mr Utamaro switched out the last light in the hall and set off in the thick darkness towards the stairs. He held out his right hand and it came into contact with the carved foot of the banister rail. He began to walk upstairs.

From above him in the darkness there came a heavy creak.

He stopped and called out:

‘Is anyone there?’

No answer.

Mr Utamaro walked quietly on up the broad stairs in the swathing darkness.

When he reached the top he was able to hear the sound of subdued breathing.

‘Who is that?’

An inquiry. Curiosity only. No impatience, no apprehension.

An unanswered inquiry.

‘Who is it?’ said Mr Utamaro again. ‘I shall put the light on in a minute when I get to the switch so I will know who it is then in any case.’

A sudden rush of heavy steps coming towards the stairhead. A heavy form lunging.

The crack as it struck the newel post.

Mr Utamaro standing quietly about a yard away said:

‘What is this nonsense?’

His assailant made no reply.

In the darkness heavy breathing and the faint creaking of the old wide floorboards.

Mr Utamaro set off towards the light switch a little way along the corridor. He moved without sound.

A board groaned sharply under his weight.

The rush of murderous steps.

In the darkness Mr Utamaro misjudged his throw. A swinging fist caught him on the right ear and sent him staggering across the corridor.

His opponent crashed into the wall, swung round quickly and lunged again.

Fingers scrabbled at Mr Utamaro's face. Gouging, tearing. Bestial. Merciless.

A heavy body pressed quickly down on him trying to trap him against the wall.

He stepped back under its force.

And in a moment was standing calmly in the middle of the corridor as his assailant hit the wall with a smack of flesh against plaster.

'I thought you would have learnt something from our encounter this afternoon, Mr Stuart,' Mr Utamaro said.

He made no attempt to reach the light switch three paces down the corridor.

'Perhaps I have learnt something,' said Alasdair.

Mr Utamaro heard him scrambling up.

And the faint swish of clothing moving fast through the air. He swayed to one side without moving his feet. Alasdair's fist struck the wall.

He cursed.

'I think you had better stop,' said Mr Utamaro. 'You will wake people up.'

'Do you think I care a damn for any of the collection of fakes and frauds you've got here?' Alasdair said.

A sudden rush across the corridor as he spoke the last words.

'Then let me suggest that you stop this because you are not going to succeed,' Mr Utamaro said from behind him.

'Don't be too sure of that,' said Alasdair.

'The odds are so heavy against you. You are angry and getting angrier. I am perfectly cool.'

In the darkness Alasdair was silent.

'Have a peppermint?' he said.

Mr Utamaro reached forward and touched a small packet Alasdair was holding out. He took a peppermint tablet from it.

'Thank you,' he said.

'I could have got you then,' Alasdair said.

'I don't think so.'

'Perhaps not.'

The sound of Alasdair crunching at one of the tablets in the darkness.

'You might even be eating poison at this moment,' he said.

'Why should you try to poison me?'

'Because you foolishly told us that you knew who killed Flaveen Mills and that you were keeping the knowledge to yourself.'

The crunch of the peppermint.

'That is the trouble with this logic that you believe in so much,' said Mr Utamaro.

A trace of exasperation.

'Either you said that because you did kill Miss Mills and have tried to poison me,' Mr Utamaro said, 'or you said it because you hope that I will not believe you. But it is just as likely that if you did kill her you would hit on the second alternative as a means of persuading me against my better judgement.'

He heard Alasdair's fingers scuffling in the peppermint bag again.

'So you tell me you know who killed the girl, but you're not going to let me know whether you think it's me or not,' Alasdair said.

'Exactly.'

'And nothing I can say will make the slightest difference to you because it might be bluff or double bluff.'

'Or double double bluff,' said Mr Utamaro.

The smell of peppermint in the darkness.

'Then how do you know who killed her?'

‘Because of the things I heard before she was killed, and because of things people have said in unguarded moments.’

‘And you’re perfectly happy about your conclusions.’

‘Perfectly.’

‘But you don’t intend to tell the police?’

The question as it might have been put by a machine.

‘I intend to do nothing,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘Intention for me is action. When I intend I act – at the same moment.’

He stood motionless in the darkness. Alasdair a yard away chewed his peppermints and moved restlessly.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ he said, ‘I was wandering down to see if there was anything readable in that ghastly library. Then I heard you and I thought “Why the hell should he tell me what I am and what I ought to do? ” I’m sorry if I hit you.’

‘I’m glad you tried,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Glad?’

‘Of course, it shows you are getting near the end of your tether.’

‘I thought we’d finished with all that,’ Alasdair said. ‘I thought after that business this afternoon that I was through with my Zen cold douche. I can’t say I felt much better for it, though.’

‘But you are not through with it, are you?’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I wish to hell we could have some light,’ Alasdair said.

A spurt of petulance.

‘I can’t see you at all,’ he added. ‘Every time you speak your voice seems to come from somewhere else.’

‘And yet I’m standing still,’ Mr Utamaro said.

Alasdair made no attempt to find the switch.

After a minute he said:

‘It’s all very well telling me all that you did this afternoon, but it leaves things just as they were. I am what I am. It’s

made no difference. It's worse if anything. I can't kid myself there's a way out now.'

'It has made a little difference, you will find,' said Mr Utamaro. 'But you have not broken through yet. You are still concealing something. Carrying a weight.'

'Concealing something? We never seem to get far away from the murder, do we?'

'Is that strange?'

'Not if you had done it, I suppose.'

'A statement which if I were interested in logic I would have to discount as an attempt to shake my confidence, providing always I believed you had killed Miss Mills.'

'Do you?'

The words shot out. An ambush.

'It is not the time to say. I am silent.'

'It's getting chilly. I think I'd better get to bed,' Alasdair said.

'Good night,' said Mr Utamaro.

Alasdair stayed where he was. Silent in the dark.

'Do you mean that I am concealing something that may have nothing to do with the murder?' he said.

'I mean you are concealing something. Anything more is a tissue of thought. And until you stop concealing it incidents like that business with Miss Mills are bound to occur.'

'Incidents like that business with Flaveen? Surely you don't think of murder as an incident.'

'It is an incident,' said Mr Utamaro, 'just like the way you snubbed her when she congratulated you on climbing the cedar tree is an incident.'

'Oh lord,' said Alasdair, 'you noticed did you?'

'One would not need to have trained oneself to see things as they are in order to notice that,' Mr Utamaro said.

'No, I suppose not. Dammit, I can never apologize to the poor kid now. Why do I do things like that?'

'You know,' said Mr Utamaro.

'I suppose you're going to tell me that I'm the only one who can do anything about it,' Alasdair said.

He waited in the darkness for Mr Utamaro to tell him.

It was fully five minutes before he realized that the Japanese was no longer there.

Chapter 19

The wind veered during the night. The buffeting, warm, rainy south-wester went and in its place there came a steady piercing wind from the east. The sky was overcast, frigidly grey. The temperature dropped until it was near freezing.

In the dining room a black oil-stove near the table was dissipating its heat almost ineffectually. The German girls wore heavy sweaters for their expeditions to the table with porridge plates, tea, and small helpings of scrambled eggs on toast. Only in the kitchen it was warmer. The blonde girl had begun her day by lighting every source of heat there was. The big gas oven was slowly working up to its maximum heat and the generous dish-warming cupboards were standing with their doors wide open each wafting a broad band of heat across the kitchen. The eight rings on the gas stove were all burning at full pressure.

Honor, sitting next to Gerry, moved her chair until it was touching his, and huddled close to him miserably.

Miss Rohan gave a sharp little cough.

'It certainly is cold-' she began.

A silence.

'You were saying that it is getting colder?' said Mr Applecheek.

'Was I? Oh, yes, I was, Father. It is.'

She broke a piece of toast into fragments.

Mr Applecheek, who was wearing an old grey scarf across his shoulders, said:

'Yes, it is colder. And a very interesting and natural subject of conversation it makes. In a moment we could get on to the likelihood of snow.'

'Snow?'

Honor jerked her head up from her scrambled egg.

'You're not serious, are you?'

'A clergyman not serious, my dear Mrs Manvers, how can you suggest such a thing?'

Honor looked out of the window.

'I believe you're right,' she said. 'What a bloody day.'

'Exactly so,' said Mr Applecheek.

'Oh come,' said Alasdair, 'a nip in the air, what could be better? Sets the blood tingling and all that.'

'It may set your blood tingling,' Honor said, 'but it certainly doesn't do anything of the kind to mine. However I've got a flask of something, thank goodness.'

'Alcohol in the morning?'

Alasdair shook his head. Roguishly.

'I wouldn't touch a drop of alcohol before midday at the earliest for anything,' he said.

'All right, all right,' Honor said, 'there's no need to make such a declaration about it.'

'I wasn't making a declaration,' Alasdair said. 'It happens to be perfectly true. The cold doesn't affect me, except that I feel in rather good form. It's a fact.'

'Well, it affects me,' said Jim.

He stood up and looked round.

'Is there anywhere at all in this house where it's going to be warm?' he said. 'If I can't think for coldness the work will go to hell.'

'Each time the door to the kitchens is opened I feel a wave of hot air,' said Mr Utamaro. 'If you are really worried by the cold, I should try to find a nook in there. But you ought not to be troubled by it. It comes of splitting up life.'

'It comes of a fall of so many degrees in the air temperature immediately surrounding me,' said Jim.

The sharp Ulster vowels.

Mr Utamaro chuckled.

'You're incorrigible, Mr Henderson,' he said. 'Do you really think that a scientific observation has anything to do with the feeling of depression you are suffering from?'

*

At ten o'clock the class assembled in the common room. They each took one of the canvas chairs and sat on them in a short line facing the trestle table in front of the fireplace. Gerry brought in a chipped blue saucer and put it on the floor beside him to use as an ashtray.

Mr Utamaro came in at three minutes past ten. He went to the table and stood facing the students.

'This morning,' he said, 'I am to give you a lecture on the Haiku. The haiku, as some of you may know, is a short poem which is the concrete evidence of the experience of satori. It must be in three lines, the first of five syllables, the second of seven, and the third of five again.'

'Just a moment if you don't mind,' said Alasdair.

He took an envelope from his pocket, brought out his pen and scribbled a note.

Mr Utamaro chuckled.

'Five syllables, seven syllables, and then five,' he said. 'You will get nowhere without that. Now here is a haiku.'

Alasdair poised his pen. Crouched with his envelope on his knee, peering up at Mr Utamaro.

Miss Rohan sat with her head at a slight angle and inclined in a hint of a bow. About to receive a presentation. Gerry cupped both hands behind his ears.

Mr Utamaro said:

'The firefly

As it fell down from a leaf,
It darted away.'

Along silence.

'But that hasn't got five syllables in the very first line,'
said Alasdair.

Mr Utamaro laughed.

'It makes it a better haiku,' he said.

The others joined the laughter. Alasdair smiled uneasily.
Tears were rolling down Mr Utamaro's cheeks. He wiped at
them. And suddenly stopped.

'But I have two pupils missing,' he said. 'I forgot to call
the roll. I think I used the book to stop a little table wobbling
in the kitchen. I had it in my hand as I was passing through.
Now, Miss Brentt told me she would be absent, but where is
Mr Henderson?'

'He left us after breakfast,' said Miss Rohan. 'I think he
went into the kitchen with his books. It seemed rather hard
on the domestic staff, but I thought it best to say nothing.'

'Yes, of course, the kitchen,' said Mr Utamaro.

He walked out of the room.

He went along the corridor, entered the chill dining room
and went across to the door into the kitchens. He found Jim
sitting on the floor in a corner next to the big oven.

'It is time to tell you something,' he said.

Jim closed his book and put it on the pile by his feet.

'I hope you're not complaining about me sitting here,' he
said. 'That blonde girl turned off all the gas points when I
came in but apparently there's a rice pudding cooking in the
oven here, so I can get a bit warm somehow.'

'Miss Mills told me that it was you who stole the sword,'
said Mr Utamaro.

Jim scrambled up.

'She told you what?' he said. 'Is it a joke you're having?'

Mr Utamaro grinned.

‘When the hell did she tell you?’ Jim said.

‘Shortly before she was killed,’ Mr Utamaro said. ‘I saw you immediately afterwards and asked you if you had the sword. You denied it.’

‘Sure, I denied it. Why wouldn’t I? I didn’t have the sword then. I didn’t have it ever.’

‘It is time you said where you went after you left me on the morning of her death, when you got so angry with me for accusing you of stealing the sword,’ Mr Utamaro said.

A flat statement.

‘I can’t see that the situation has been altered at all,’ Jim said. ‘And I refused to say before.’

‘The situation is always altering,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘If we’re going in for more talk about Zen,’ Jim said, ‘I’m going to sit down where I was warm. Look out of the window there. It’s snowing.’

Jim slumped back into his corner by the oven. Mr Utamaro turned to the kitchen window. Across the small stable yard a few pellets of snow scurried. In the kitchen the warm odour of rice pudding.

Jim settled his back against the wall.

‘I’ll tell you one time the situation stops altering,’ he said.

‘It stops just like a clock – when the mainspring goes.’

Mr Utamaro turned round from the window.

‘With death,’ said Jim.

‘Yes,’ Mr Utamaro said, ‘I know that is what you have been thinking. You have been seeing everything as frozen, caught at the instant of Miss Mills’ death.’

‘That’s the way it was. There was a relationship – developing, as they say. All relationships go on developing all the time. That’s a sociological fact. They go on until down comes the chopper, and then you’re left with whatever there was.’

‘No,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Of course you say no. You’ve got a vested interest in saying no.’

Mr Utamaro grinned.

‘But I have just proved you wrong,’ he said. ‘When I told you that Miss Mills believed you had stolen the sword didn’t I alter the relationship between you and her?’

‘All right, you did. But only because of an accident. The stopped clock has been jogged. The minute hand has ticked forward a bit. And now the clock’s as much stopped as ever it was.’

‘I will tell you what really happened to the sword,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘It was taken from my room and hidden in the cedar tree. Miss Mills found it there. She later got it into her head that you had stolen it from me and hidden it. She was going to put it back for you if you did nothing about it yourself. She promised me that the sword would appear again.’

Jim bit his lower lip.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘that’s all new to me. You’re telling me something. The clock has ticked on another couple of times.’

‘It has never stopped,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘I have shown you how easy it is to see that it is still going. But you are determined not to see it.’

‘Nobody ever called me pig-headed,’ said Jim.

Mr Utamaro laughed happily.

‘Pig head,’ he said.

Jim stood up abruptly and moved away from the oven.

‘It’s getting too bloody hot down there,’ he said. ‘And the smell of rice pudding’s enough to make a cat sick.’

‘If you try to isolate events and put them in a compartment all of their own,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘you deceive yourself into thinking that it is possible for something to stay still.’

Jim strolled over to the window, shoved his hands into his pockets and stood staring out.

A thin layer of hard powdered snow on the cement of the yard.

‘You’re maybe right,’ Jim said.

Inside the oven the wide dish of rice pudding bubbled slowly.

There was a faint plopping sound.

Jim jingled the coins in his pocket.

Silence.

The kitchen pleasantly warm. Outside another burst of snow pellets rattled against the windows.

Jim turned from the window. A resolution taken.

‘I was waiting for Flaveen up in her room, from half past twelve to one o’clock, the time she was murdered,’ he said. ‘She asked me to come up.’

Mr Utamaro said nothing.

‘I suppose you pretty well know all this,’ Jim said.

‘It is better for you to tell me,’ said Mr Utamaro.

Jim looked out of the window again.

‘That snow will never lie,’ he said.

‘No. It is too late in the year.’

‘I couldn’t see why the hell anyone should have the satisfaction of calling the poor kid a whore,’ Jim said. ‘All right she hadn’t known me above a couple of days and she was prepared to go to bed with me. Maybe she was a bit readier for that sort of thing than’s supposed to be polite. Well, I don’t care. She’s entitled to her privacy just the same. If she hadn’t been killed no one would ever have known. I don’t see why they need to know now.’

‘Because she was killed,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘I was up with her in her room on the evening the sword was stolen, too,’ Jim said. ‘I told her it would be noticed if we

weren't down to hear your announcements at nine o'clock. That was why we made another date.'

He went across the kitchen and crouched in front of the oven warming his hands at it. The sound of steady bubbling.

'I wonder is that pudding cooking too fast?' he said.

'Do you know how to turn the heat down?' said Mr Utamaro.

'There ought to be a control of some sort.'

Jim examined the oven.

'This should be it,' he said.

'Then make it a little less hot.'

'You're sure it'll be all right?'

'Yes,' said Mr Utamaro.

Knowledge.

Jim turned the knob a little and stood up. Still facing the oven he said:

'I suppose you could put it that she seduced me. But she was a decent sort of kid.'

'You must give the superintendent all the facts,' said Mr Utamaro. 'You will find him in the warden's office.'

'I hope to hell he's got it warm,' said Jim.

He picked up his books from the floor in the corner by the oven and, carrying them in a pile in front of him, went out.

*

'All the time the telephone in the warden's office keeps ringing,' said the dark girl.

'What do you expect?' said the blonde one. 'You don't think it's your parents all the way from Hamburg, do you?'

'Yes,' said the dark one.

A small voice.

The blonde laughed.

'If Superintendent Padbourne had sent them a telegram about our little escapade in the larder they would have rung

up long ago,' she said. 'No, you can settle down to wait for the end now.'

'The end?'

'For the arrest'

'But is there going to be an arrest?'

The blonde shrugged.

'Who knows? Perhaps there never will be one. But that telephone is not ringing for nothing. That Superintendent Padbourne is making inquiries about all these people. He has already found out what a liar Mr Gerry is.'

'How do you know? Is Mr Gerry going to be arrested?'

'You don't think you get arrested for being a liar, do you? Not even in England.'

'But how do you know he has found out that Mr Gerry is a liar?'

'That wouldn't be very difficult. Almost everything Mr Gerry says is a lie.'

The dark girl said no more. Her eyes clouded with thought.

The blonde one peeled another potato. The thick strips of skin slipping through the slot of the peeler. She finished and dropped the potato into the bowl with a splash.

'Come on,' she said, 'you are doing nothing. All this lot has got to be done yet, and if we give them another tin of peas today there will be complaints. We ought to prepare some cabbage.'

The dark one picked up a potato and began to peel it slowly.

'Well,' said the blonde, 'what are you thinking about? It must be something serious to stop you working like this. You are usually the one who is so conscientious.'

'Mr Gerry,' said the dark one, 'are you sure that everything he says is a lie?'

The blonde laughed. A gurgle of scorn.

'Every word,' she said.

The dark one was silent again. Furiously peeling away at the remaining potatoes.

'Why do you ask?' said the blonde. 'Has he been saying anything to you?'

Sharp. Suspicious.

'No,' said the dark one. 'I won't let him say anything to me.

The filthy liar.'

The blonde eyebrows raised above the malicious blue eyes.

*

Mr Utamaro entered the warden's office. The pigeon holes, the graphs, the charts.

The superintendent was sitting at the desk. A sergeant in uniform stood by it gathering up papers and putting them into a pale blue cardboard file.

'Ah, there you are, Mr Utamaro,' said the superintendent. 'I wanted just a word with you. All right, sergeant?'

'Yes, sir,' said the sergeant.

He put the last sheet of paper in the file, tucked it under his arm, and went out. The warden's table bare again.

'Please sit down,' said the superintendent.

Mr Utamaro sat in the bentwood chair, his hands resting lightly on his thighs. Waiting.

'I gather you persuaded young Henderson to talk,' the superintendent said.

The piggy eyes fixed on Mr Utamaro.

'The time came to make him see how foolish he was being,' Mr Utamaro said.

'I dare say. You realize that we've now got to the situation where logically the murder didn't happen?'

Mr Utamaro laughed.

‘This happens to be a serious business,’ the superintendent said.

Angrily.

Mr Utamaro said nothing.

‘Now listen to me,’ Superintendent Padbourne went on. ‘Up to now the picture of the crime has been quite clear. The girl was in her room, quite accountably at that time of day. And between 12.27 when Miss Rohan saw her leaning out of the window, and lunch time at about 1 p.m. when everybody – except the Manvers, who have been accounted for – met in the dining room, she was killed. No doubt in her room. All right?’

Mr Utamaro grinned. The row of strong broad teeth.

‘Oh go on, laugh,’ said the superintendent. ‘I know now it can’t be right, but until Henderson came out with his party piece it seemed the reasonable timetable of events.’

‘Reasonable,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘That is what you should suspect, superintendent. Reason, there is your criminal.’

‘Listen,’ said the superintendent. ‘Tell me how the girl was killed. Just tell me how. I’ll believe anything you say. You know Henderson’s story? Apparently his appointment with that little drab was at 12.30 and he made a point of keeping it to the minute. He wasn’t going to be late in case she stood him up, and he wasn’t going to be early in case he offended her. So he waited downstairs till just before 12.29, and then he went straight up to her room. He knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door. It opened. He decided to go in and wait for her. He waited. No one ever came and at one o’clock he went to see if she was having lunch.’

‘Then you have two minutes,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘Two minutes at the outside, mark you,’ said the superintendent. ‘And you’re not going to convince me that in that time somebody came into the room, said something to her so that she left the window and faced them, plunged

that sword into her, wiped the handle, wiped away traces of blood – we found slight signs there, it pretty well proves that's where she died – and then carried the body across the corridor, first making sure nobody was coming, and dumped it over the gallery of the library, first making sure no one was in the library below. All in two minutes at the very outside.'

'So what do you think?' asked Mr Utamaro.

'I don't know what to think. I've even wondered if – No, I won't countenance it. There's some explanation. There's bound to be.'

Mr Utamaro smiled.

'What did you wonder, superintendent?'

'Never mind what I wondered. I'm here to deal with facts. And there's another fact I've discovered that I'd like to hear your views on. Luckily this time it's a bit more straightforward.'

'And what is that?'

'Just this. In the course of my duties I've been over the whole of the top corridor with the bedrooms off it pretty thoroughly. I've made some interesting discoveries. For instance, I was able to confirm Miss Rohan's statement about that book. It's not the sort of thing I should like to think of my wife getting to see. But that's not what I wanted to ask you about.'

Mr Utamaro sitting passively in the bentwood chair.

'It's something I found in Stuart's room,' said the superintendent.

Mr Utamaro smiled slightly.

'It was obviously intended to be hidden,' the superintendent went on, 'but it would take more than him to hide anything from me.'

The pudgy hands clenched.

‘It was an empty rum bottle,’ he said. ‘There was a drop still swilling about in it and I checked that it was what the label said it was. Now, this is the odd thing about it: it was cheap rum and it was very sweet rum.’

‘Rum is a spirit, is it not?’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘I am not very familiar with European drinks.’

‘Yes,’ said the superintendent, ‘it’s a spirit. But it’s not a spirit that’s drunk a great deal in the sort of circles Mr Stuart moves in. They go in for whisky on the whole. Or perhaps brandy. And if they do drink rum they don’t choose that sort. Does this suggest anything to you?’

‘If it is a drink it is for drinking,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘For drinking? You think he did drink it? I rather thought so myself. A secret drinker.’

‘There are no secrets,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Sometimes people deceive themselves into thinking something will never be known. But they forget that you cannot divide one thing from another and hide it. It is plain to see that Mr Stuart drinks. You can tell it from his moods. He is subject to great fits of depression and then he goes away and comes back a little later in a very aggressive frame of mind. And after a bit this turns to a strong irritability.’

‘Matter of impressions,’ said the superintendent. ‘I prefer the solid evidence of the empty bottle.’

‘And of the peppermints,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘The peppermints? Oh, you mean he eats those peppermints to disguise the smell. Damn it, he even offered me one.’

High dudgeon.

‘I am hoping that quite soon he will come to terms with himself,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘He is one of my star pupils, you know. He is making great progress. But he has still to bring himself to admit this drinking. That is why I have had to keep silent about it. So that he can say it first. And I think that sooner or later he will.’

'I'm not at all sure that that isn't concealing facts which I've a right to know,' said the superintendent.

'Perhaps it was.'

'If I could be sure that was all.'

The superintendent stopped. He snapped his mouth shut. Too much said.

'If you could be sure that was all?' asked Mr Utamaro. A smile hovering in his eyes. The superintendent stood up.

'Well,' he said, 'thank you very much for your opinion about Stuart, and I think that will be all.' Mr Utamaro got up and went grinning to the door. As he took hold of the knob the superintendent said: 'What's so funny?'

'To the man who sees life as it is it all seems very amusing,' said Mr Utamaro. 'And what in particular at this moment?'

Mr Utamaro turned and looked at the superintendent.

Blandly.

'Your difficulties, superintendent,' he said.

The superintendent slumped back in the chair.

'I believe you know what I've been thinking,' he said.

'You were bound to think it,' said Mr Utamaro.

'Very well, then,' said the superintendent, 'since we both know what's in my mind, let's say it out loud.'

He leant forward and looked at Mr Utamaro.

The piggy eyes blazing with determination.

'Is there some trickery going on here?' he said. 'All this Zen business, what black mischief can you make it perform?'

Chapter 20

Lunch was hashed beef, potatoes – remarkable for the number of eyes left in – and tinned peas. The rice pudding followed. Spoilt through overcooking.

Superintendent Padbourne had been invited to join the others. He made no attempt to eat the pudding after the first mouthful.

‘I’m afraid the cooking is not all that could be desired,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘I don’t know what my wife would say if she knew you were eating meals like this all the time,’ the superintendent said. ‘There’s no need to eat badly even if there’s not much money. I was in two minds about packing those girls off back home, I rather wish –’

‘Pas devant les domestiques,’ said Miss Rohan.

The penetrating tones.

Superintendent Padbourne stopped. At the sound of steps behind him he glanced round. The blonde girl was coming towards them through the rows of trestle tables and up-ended chairs.

‘Yes, what is it?’ said Mr Utamaro.

The others all looked at the girl.

‘Mr Gerr— It is for Mr Manvers,’ she said. ‘The telephone.’

Gerry got up.

‘Thank you, duck,’ he said. ‘In the warden’s office?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl.

She blushed suddenly. A rosy pink. And ran out of the room.

'I suppose it's my ever-loving,' said Gerry. 'Wouldn't be surprised if she's ratted on us.'

'She gave me to understand that she was coming back here this afternoon,' the superintendent said.

'Not to worry,' said Gerry, 'she's the honest one of the family. She'll be back.'

He went out whistling.

The superintendent leant over to Miss Rohan.

'Pardon me,' he said, 'but what was that you said when that girl came in? I didn't quite catch it.'

'I was warning you that she was there, superintendent,' said Miss Rohan. 'It was *Pas devant les domestiques*'

'That's French.'

'Yes.'

'Rather wasted on me,' the superintendent said, 'I never learnt it. I dare say those girls speak it a sight better than I do.'

'Oh dear, yes,' said Miss Rohan. 'I never thought. One forgets that domestics are so seldom domestics in the real sense these days.'

'I dare say,' said the superintendent. 'Anyhow I'm thankful this case hasn't involved those girls all that much. You never know where you are with foreigners. You never quite know how much they understand for one thing. That fair one who came in just now seems to be up to everything all right - a bit too much so at times - but the other one, the dark, plump girl's a bit stupid to my mind. Luckily, I've not had to rely on their unsupported evidence for anything.'

'And me, superintendent?' said Mr Utamaro. 'Does my apparent understanding of English satisfy you that I know what is going on?'

The superintendent looked up the table at him. A glimmer of a smile in the piggy eyes.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘you caught me out properly there. To tell you the truth, you speak English so well I’d forgotten you weren’t one of us.’

‘A compliment indeed,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘On the other hand,’ said the superintendent, ‘I won’t disguise from you that your way of looking at things completely confuses me.’

‘You’re not the only one in that boat, superintendent,’ said Mr Applecheek. ‘Confusion is the great beauty of Mr Utamaro’s system.’

‘You know, I might like a few words with you on that, sir,’ said the superintendent. ‘You may be able to put my mind at rest on one or two –’

The door at the far end of the room opened with a bang. Gerry stood in the doorway.

At once everybody stopped eating and looked at him. Nobody spoke. Six pairs of eyes held by the sight of a man changed in less than two minutes into someone completely different.

The stuffing jerked out of the cock sparrow.

Gerry’s shoulders drooped, his arms hung at his sides as if he could not think what use they had. The colour had left his face and the neat line of moustache looked as though it had been applied to the upper lip with black greasepaint. His blue blazer with its brass buttons and his bright stripy silk tie looked incongruously gay draped on the scarecrow figure.

When he spoke it was a shock to hear the same voice from so different a man.

‘It was about Honor, the telephone call,’ he said. ‘You know it turned out that she was quite right all along about that balloon. It was dangerous. She oughtn’t to have gone up in it.’

Mr Utamaro left his place and walked swiftly up the room through the neat rows of tables. When he got to the door he

lifted one of the up-ended chairs off the end of a table, swung it deftly on to its legs, took hold of Gerry by his elbows and sat him down.

‘There was an accident to the balloon?’ he said. Gerry slowly looked up at him.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that was what they called it on the blower. An accident. I’m sorry to have to tell you your wife has been involved in an accident, they said. It’s what’s called breaking it gently, you know. They meant she was dead.’

‘Dead?’

Gerry’s slack arms tautened convulsively.

‘Yes, dead,’ he said. ‘Killed. Finished. Gone. Broken up and chucked away. They gave me the full details, you know. It was an unexpected gust of wind, they said. It caught the balloon just as it was taking off, and the basket heeled over and tipped them all out. The others weren’t hurt at all. They didn’t fall very far. But Honor got caught by a stake in a fence. They kept telling me death was instantaneous. Instantaneous, that was the word. It’s what you say, you know.’

The arms fell slack again, the head flopped on to the chest.

‘It may have been the best thing that could have happened to her,’ said Mr Utamaro.

An announcement. Loud, inescapable. A summing up.

Slowly Gerry raised his head again.

‘What do you mean?’ A hoarse whisper.

‘I mean that she killed Flaveen Mills,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘And sooner or later the superintendent here would have found out. You couldn’t hope to keep it hidden really, not when it was after all an unpremeditated act. Killing in the way she once told me it was in her character to kill.’

Gerry did not take his eyes from Mr Utamaro’s face.

‘Then you do know,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘All the facts were there. It needed only someone not blinded by reasoning to see them for what they were. The last one was put before me yesterday at the tea ceremony. Do you remember how Miss Rohan described how Miss Mills blew a tweeter at her out of a window? She used the words “she just blew the thing two or three times, only about half way out”. That was the fact. Miss Rohan at once added to it from her own mind. She spoke about the half-heartedness of the blowing and asked whether it was an intimation of death. But the blowing was not half-hearted; it was simply mechanically inefficient. The breath had to go through the rubber tube of Mr Manvers’ artificial flower from where he was kneeling below the window up to where the tweeter was gripped in the dead girl’s lips.’

From the dining table Superintendent Padbourne asked:

‘How do you know all this?’

The untasted bowl of rice pudding by his elbow.

‘After the murder the joke flower was no longer to be seen,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘Mr Manvers told me he had lost it. And then Miss Rohan made a mistake about the colour of the tweeter. She told me that Miss Mills had blown her green one out of the window, but Miss Mills had taken the Oxford blue one. The green one belonged to Mr Manvers.’

The superintendent got up and came across to where Mr Utamaro was standing beside the broken figure of Gerry.

‘You talked about an unpremeditated act, Mr Utamaro,’ he said, ‘but surely if you steal a sword one day and kill someone with it the next, that’s hardly unpremeditated?’

Gerry turned his head slightly. The glazed eyes fixed on Superintendent Padbourne.

‘Honor didn’t steal the sword,’ he said. ‘Flaveen did. Honor burst in on her when she was looking at it and when Flaveen told her I was going to run away with her Honor just

snatched up the sword and used it. Silly kid, Flaveen, as if I didn't know which side my bread was buttered on.'

The automatic cynicism, meaningless now.

'Ah, I begin to see,' said the superintendent. 'It was you who found the girl dead and put two and two together.'

'I knew Honor was the only one with any reason to kill her,' said Gerry. 'She cottoned on to the fact that when she stopped me seeing Flaveen in the office I brought her down here. And naturally enough when I saw what Honor had done I started thinking pretty fast, and I cooked up my little game with the tweeter. I had a hell of a time finding Honor and persuading her not just to wait to be arrested. Seems a waste now.'

'So you see, superintendent,' said Mr Utamaro, 'there was no question of the murder taking place while Mr Henderson was actually in the room. There was no question of this Zen business performing any black mischief.'

'All right,' said the superintendent, 'I admit Zen isn't what I thought it was. But what about this business of the girl being known to Mr Manvers? I take it you were on to that.'

'I knew she was here under false colours because she told us so,' said Mr Utamaro. 'She told us all the first afternoon she was here.'

From the dining table Jim spoke.

'Nothing she said told me anything about her,' he said.

Mr Utamaro looked across at him.

'You were not listening to the actual words she used,' he said. 'You were adding your own impressions to them. When she said she understood what Zen was, that it was a riddle game, like "when is someone in this house and not in this house", you thought she was just being a bit stupid. But her riddle was an ordinary one with a simple answer. When is someone in the house and not in the house? When they are in the house under a false name.'

‘You’re sure of this?’ said Superintendent Padbourne. ‘The possibility of a false name had occurred to me, naturally enough, but why should she change her name to come on an outing like this?’

‘Outing,’ said Alasdair.

‘Because her real name was the only thing about her that Mrs Manvers knew,’ said Mr Utamaro.

‘It was Doreen Miles,’ said Gerry.

The quiet voice.

‘Mrs Manvers told us,’ said Mr Utamaro, ‘that she had insisted that her husband came here because she was jealous of a red-haired girl at his office,’ Mr Utamaro went on. ‘She used the words “Your beastly little Carrots at the office”.’

‘But Flaveen’s hair wasn’t carrotty at all,’ said Miss Rohan.

‘I remember thinking to myself what a wonderful soft red it was and that it was a pity she didn’t pay more attention to it.’

‘I called her Carrots,’ said Gerry. ‘It was a joke.’

Flat. Washed out.

‘Mrs Manvers had found out what she had about this affair by using a detective,’ Mr Utamaro said.’ So she knew the name Doreen Miles and she knew she was red-headed. That was all. It was clever of Mr Manvers to think he could cheat by sending a girl with pale reddish hair called Flaveen Mills on the course at the same time as himself. Only she tried to be too clever and Mrs Manvers guessed.’

‘She did guess and she didn’t,’ Gerry said. ‘That was my final trump. She couldn’t be quite sure. I told Flaveen to remember that. But when Honor went for her in her room on Monday she let herself be tricked into admitting it. That was when she told Honor I was going to run away with her and Honor picked up the sword and killed her.’

Mr Applecheek sitting quietly at his place at the dining table said:

‘I have a link to fit in here. Miss Mills, if we are to call her that, did not take the sword from Mr Utamaro. I was the one who did that. Miss Mills simply found it where I had hidden it in the big cedar tree.’

‘She must have seen it when she climbed the tree to drop the sugar over me on Sunday night,’ said Jim. ‘She was a bit subdued afterwards. I wondered why.’

‘It was all there to be seen,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘When I told you all that the sword had disappeared Miss Mills was the first to speak. She said “But it’s – “ and then she was interrupted. If you hadn’t all been worrying about the sword you would have remembered her words and known that she could tell you where the sword was. And later she said in answer to Mr Applecheek that she knew the cedar was easy to climb, but you were all so busy indulging in fears for Mrs Manvers’ safety up the tree that you heard but did not hear.’

‘Well,’ said Mr Applecheek, ‘we are having a Zen lesson indeed.’

‘There was a long and twisted chain of fears and hopes,’ Mr Utamaro went on. ‘Miss Mills made Mr Manvers jealous by paying attention to Mr Henderson. So Mr Manvers tried, as he put it, to gum up the works by telling Miss Mills that Mr Henderson had stolen the sword. This made her take it from the place where she had seen it so that she could restore it. And so it came to be in her room.’

‘There’s something I don’t understand,’ said Alasdair. ‘Why did Mrs Manvers feel it necessary to attack me? She must have been in a terrible state, but it doesn’t seem to me to add up.’

‘More fears,’ said Mr Utamaro. ‘She feared I knew more than I did. She tried to deceive me with a false chain of reasoning. But the man who has abandoned reason is the one to see through false reasoning. All these lies you have

all told, what good do you think they do? Ever since you came here you all have told them in your different ways. It has been a saga of lies.'

Mr Applecheek stood up. The tall, rusty black figure, stooping.

'We know you are right,' he said. 'Zen is certainly a wonderful thing. You have shown us that in no uncertain way.'

He shook his head.

Sadly.

'Such a pity,' he said, 'that it is only one of the fancier products of the human mind. Such a pity that its main effect is to cut us off from the truth.'

*

'Oh, they are so dull,' said the blonde girl.

'Who is dull?' the dark one said.

'Who is dull? Who is dull? You are so dreamy nowadays.

You never know what a person is talking about. This course is so dull. The "Shakespeare, his Mind and Art" crowd are so dull. And if you weren't so silly now you would know it.'

'They are just another lot of students,' said the dark girl.

'It is a good thing there are so many of them, they do not leave you time to think.'

'Well, they leave me time to think. And you know what I think about?'

No answer.

'AH right, since you insist on knowing, I will tell you. I think about the Zen course. I think about it most of the time. We shall never see such days again.'

'Never?' said the dark one.

'Never. Oh, Mr Gerry. Mr Gerry.'

A deep sigh.

The dark girl went steadily on chopping up a huge cabbage. She paid no attention to the fact that the blonde was no longer helping her.

‘Mr Gerry,’ said the blonde. ‘And you left me nothing to remember you by.’

The dark one dropped the knife in her hand. She said almost to herself:

‘He left me something.’

The blonde looked at her. Sudden realization.

‘Oh, Trudi,’ said the dark one, ‘how shall I ever tell my parents?’

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